



[Ladies and gentlemen! It has been a long time. I am overjoyed to greet you once more. Let us thank the night that allowed us to meet again.]

[But beware! The streets at night can be a dangerous place. This story is about a series of horrid murders that took place on the island of Growerth.]

[A mind-reading vampire, a quiet young werewolf, a vampire detective, a pair from a certain Clan, and a TV crew investigating the case. Sneaking into that darkness are my son Relic, the human girl named Hilda who has accepted the Night, and the noblest of petty villains, Mayor Watt Stalf.]

[On this most outrageous of nights, what thoughts cross the minds of the vampires, the humans, and the dhampyr? This particular tale is one you must see with your own eyes.]

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A conversation involving a certain Clan member.

Pamela: I do not understand why you would show so much interest in that—that relict, O most noble and proud Master Dimguil.

Dimguil: Humans visit the zoo sometimes to look at pandas and lions, Pamela.

Pamela: Ah! Citing a lower life form as an example. Your sense of humor is as exquisite as always, my honored master.

Dimguil: But your eyes don't look very entertained... In any case, are you going to conceal your eyes again when we leave for the island?

Pamela: But of course, Master. How could I possibly burn the image of aught but the property of Sunford into my eyes?

Dimguil: I see. I think you might be quite attractive to humans and vampires alike if you were to show your eyes. But it's true that some men are—strangely enough—attracted to blindfolded women. I suppose you wouldn't have many problems.

Pamela: Wh-what do you mean by that, Master?!

Dimguil: I'm talking about your love life, Pamela.

Pamela: Ugh!



Watson (Detective's assistant?): *chomp* *munch* More meat, please.

Hilda (Village girl): The castle's always so lively after dusk. It's like there's a masquerade happening here every night. ...Come to think of it, do you know how to dance, Relic?

Relic (Vampire lord): I think it's more lively during the day thanks to all the tourists. Although I'm always asleep then, so I guess I wouldn't really know. ...Wh-what? No, I'm not avoiding your question. Really.

Growerth was an ordinary island in northern Germany.

It followed the laws of Germany, and like other parts of the country, it was governed by the hands of humans for the goal of a democratic welfare state.

Humans living their lives, raising families, making money, and building up their culture—it was a perfectly typical tourist town, little different from any other.

With the exception of the minor fact that the island was home to a large population of vampires.

Being in a position of political power did not guarantee knowledge of vampires. Presidents and prime ministers could be in the dark, while employees at a bakery by the parliament building might know about them.

And depending on the place, there was a chance that a human being who was actually half vampire was the mayor of a small city. One such place was the city of Neuberg on the island of Growerth. Watt Stalf, elected twice now in the municipal elections that took place once every six years, was without a doubt a dhampyr. But thanks to his affable nature, he was popular with a large majority of the citizens, political affiliation notwithstanding.

However, that only spoke for his face as a human being. As a vampire, he put on a different mantle. But most people did not know—in fact, most people did not know about the existence of vampires to begin with.

Of course, some citizens knew about vampires, about the Lord of Waldstein Castle, and the caverns underneath the island. But because those people never went out of their way to disclose such facts, Growerth continued to function today as an island of humans.

Being an island of humans also naturally meant—

Like any other human settlement, shady murder cases did occur on the island. And like any other settlement, sometimes such cases were lost to the city's labyrinthine streets forever.

And perhaps Neuberg's minor difference—the presence of vampires—would shed some light on such normally-unsolved cases.

Whether the humans wanted it or not.

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"This is Juna Riebeluka from ZZZ Network, reporting from the island of Growerth in Northern Germany. This morning, the body of Ms. Zara, who was recently reported missing, was found in the harbor area. She is the third victim in the serial murder-kidnapping cases that have been plaguing the island since last weekend. Investigators say that the body was found at the precise location that was announced to the police and the press, making it very likely that the announcement was sent by the kidnapper. The mayor of the city of Neuberg, Mr. Watt Stalf, has issued a statement requesting the cooperation of the investigators—"

Prologue: The storyteller doth arrive!

It should have been a night to celebrate.

The night he would finally break free of his past and take a new step toward the future.

"..."

It was the middle of the night. He was abiding in the silence of the rooftop.

His name was James Sutherland.

Just a few years ago, he was a seventeen-year-old engineer at a small furniture factory, with the resolute dream—or vain delusion—of one day being recognized globally for his designs.

But then came an unavoidable turning point in his life.

It was brought on by a being that defied both reality and description.

A being more commonly known as a vampire.

The memories of losing his beloved, to whom he had promised his future, played back like a movie on the back of his eyelids.

The monster sunk its fangs into the woman's neck. But it did not subjugate her or turn her into a living corpse. All it did was tear out her carotid artery.

The sensation of her blood spouting onto his cheek. He could still feel it, clear as day.

But today would be the end. He would no longer be chained by such memories.

He was not certain if the vampire really existed. He even began to think that everything he saw that day was just a hallucination. But the warmth of her blood on his face cried out, endlessly reminding him that his memories were real. He found himself stepping onto the ridiculous path of seeking out the vampire.

And so, James Sutherland finally found an answer!

There was indeed a creature different from humans!

A vampire! His lover's murderer, and his own sworn enemy!

He stepped into a building where the vampire's soirée was supposedly taking place.

The humans gathered there must have been enslaved by the monster. It occurred to him that perhaps he should kill them as well, but because he had no reason to fight every person on the premises, he quietly asked them, "where is the vampire?". The people gathered there exchanged glances, each and every one, and told him with a laugh that the vampire was moonbathing on the rooftop. Although he was curious to know if these people

knew he was here to kill the vampires, he trusted what they told him and went up to the roof.

And there, it happened.

He came face-to-face with the terrible monster that stole his life away—the vampire!

“...Shut up.”

‘Shut up’, he said.

But his voice echoed aimlessly across the rooftop.

After all, there was no one here to speak other than himself.

“Shut up! Whose voice is this?! Where the fuck are you yammering from?!”

“I’m not yammering, you know. And that thing just now—that was a silent voice. One that doesn’t create vibrations in the air.”

“!”

This voice was different from the one ringing through his head. It was a sound with a clear source—a sound created by an organism’s vibrating vocal cords.

When James turned to the source of the voice, he found me standing there.

He had a suspicious pair of goggles over the top of his face. Like a set of mirrors, the lenses of the smartly-crafted goggles cast a distorted reflection of James and the moonlight. The man was probably about twenty years old. His shimmering black hair glinted in a different way from the surface of the goggles.

He was wearing a black, high-end tuxedo, though without a necktie. The top was obviously expensive, though unbuttoned, making it very difficult to tell what kind of man he was.

In front of this suspicious man, James thought to say, ‘Shut up, you monster!’

“Shut up, you—...?”

At that moment he finally understood.

The man before him—in other words, me—was reading his thoughts and speaking directly into his mind.

“I see. So I appear to be about twenty to your eyes. Just to let you know, My time stopped when I was seventeen years old.”

“Shit... what the hell are you?!”

"I think you already know. Of course, it looks like you want to deny that answer. The fact that the creature you so wanted to kill could be so terrifying."

"...!"

The man felt it to his bones.

He realized just what kind of a creature he was trying to murder.

"I told you to shut up!"

He cried out again to dispel his fear—

"Shut up... shut up shut up shut up shut up shut up shut up! Shut up shut up shut up shut up shut up shut up shut up! ———! —————!! —!!!! —!!
—————!! —————!!"

Shouting won't... Whoops. Maybe I should say this out loud.

"Shouting won't stop me, you know. I'm sorry to tell you this, but this is a hobby of mine. It's become a habit, you see. Taking my time to read someone's thoughts while teasing them."

"—————!! —————AAAAAAAHHHHHH!
AAAAAAARRRRRRGGGGGHHHHHHHHHHH!"

Oh. So you didn't hear what I said out loud.

Hey, I told you shouting won't do you any good.

A bunch of 'aaarrrrggghh's? You're just going to embarrass me.

Well now. I guess I'll talk to you with *this* voice.

Calm down.

How're you going to avenge the girl in that sorry state?

You're going to draw that katana you have slung behind your back and try to behead me with a horizontal slice. See? I told you so.

"—————!! —————!!!!!!!"

You're an open book. You know I'm talking into your mind, and you know I can read your thoughts. But you still pick and choose a target before you lunge. Really, the pinnacle of stupidity. You say you're fighting for your beloved—your murdered lover—but that's a complete lie. I bet this is what the girl's thinking—

'Please don't put yourself in danger for my sake.'

...right? But you're selfishly picking a fight you can't even win! With techniques so basic that even I can predict them! Heh heh heh. Sorry. I lied. I lied just now. It was a tiny piece of fiction I made up. Heh heh. You really *are* fighting for your beloved. And I bet this is what the girl's thinking—'Kill that son of a bitch even if it kills you. Skewer the little shit until he

screams like a fucking bitch. Avenge my death'. That's right. You *are* fighting for her. Hm? I just acknowledged your goal, didn't I? So why're you getting angry? You know, your girlfriend was pretty amusing when she wept in that voice. Heh heh... Heh heh heh heh! See? Your moves are getting even easier to read. I can see clear as day where you're going to attack next.

"..."

Oh. You stopped moving.

Did you overheat? Your mind is totally blank.

I guess you did put your all into it. Here, a sign of my respect. I'll talk to you *normally*.

"I don't blame you for being confused. I put a few dozen seconds' worth of words into your brain in just a *couple* of seconds. But that's not enough to overload you. If I wanted to, I could cram years, decades, or centuries of information—not just sights, but sounds, smells, tastes, and sensations—all into your brain at once in a single clump. Then your mind really might fry. Though I'm no brain scientist, so I can't explain anything about synapses to you."

"..."

"Oh. Kneeling already? You're shaking. Covered in cold sweat, too. You'd better not overdo it."

"..."

"Don't make such a scared face. C'mon. Give me one of those murderous glares again."

"Agh... Uwaa..."

"...All fried, huh. I guess the party's over."

Oh, since we've come this far, let me engrave a little piece of information into your mind.

I'm not the one who killed your fiancée. All that stuff I said earlier was just me trying to provoke you.

You seem to be under the impression that I'm the only vampire in the world. Let me correct that.

In other words, your coming here was a simple misunderstanding. A complete misstep.

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As James collapsed in a heap, the bespectacled vampire turned and sighed. Although vampires did not necessarily have to breathe, they still had the option of doing so. Vampires inhaled, exhaled, and blinked in different ways depending on the individual, but most were similar to humans. Some vampire-borns also breathed and blinked unconsciously, but the cause was still a topic of research among certain vampires.

Realizing that he had sighed, the bespectacled vampire shrank back slightly and addressed the stairwell leading inside.

"Eavesdropping, Dorrikey? You detectives and your sick hobbies."

(Wh-wha...?)

Reacting to the thought was another 'mental voice', this one coming from the stairwell.

(Like you're one to talk, Mirald. Unlike you, I can't use telepathy, so I don't know what you said to that man. But it was obviously something despicable.)

Listening in to the sarcastic thoughts coming from the stairwell, Mirald spoke out loud.

"If you're a detective, why not try and deduce what happened between me and that man? I'm sure what I said with my mouth was enough for you to figure something out."

"(Damn it—if I can't deduce this, I'll be humiliated)Unfortunately, I make a policy of reserving my deductions for proper cases."

"Finally, you talk. Although your mind's been spewing words for a while now."

"(Dammit you mind-reading bastard)You're one hell of a bastard, Mirald. Why don'tcha just go die somewhere?"

The man in the shadows shook his head, spitting out words a little harsher than he intended, and emerged into the moonlight. The man—Key Dorrikey—was a vampire with a monocle over one eye, holding a Holmes-inspired pipe in one hand. He faced down Mirald nervously. Though Key's clothing was weighty and fit for a nobleman, his still-youthful face and somewhat unbalanced mien made it seem as though his outfit was the center of his bearing.

"For a self-proclaimed detective, your mouth and body react too quickly. You're far removed from rational, logical behavior."

"(Where did *that* come from)What do you mean, 'self-proclaimed'? It seems to me that our definitions of 'rational' and 'logical' are different. In any case, what are you going to do with that young man? I de-(that was close. If I said 'deduce', he'd remind me that I said I save my deductions for proper cases)... I suspect that he won't show hostility to you again. Poor thing. What kind of trauma did you force into his mind?"

"Nothing terrifying, necessarily. I only informed him that I can clearly read his thoughts, his past, and his desires. A little payback for disturbing my wonderful soirée with a petty misunderstanding."

Mirald shrugged. Dorrikey chuckled bitterly and thought sarcastically to himself, knowing that Mirald could hear him.

"...(How is this a 'wonderful' soirée, anyway? I don't need telepathy to see what these people want from you)."

"Your... what was it now... ah. Your attempt at sophisticated reasoning is really admirable. It's like every fiber of your being is bent on becoming a great detective. Although I do recall you being a little less refined and calling me a 'mind-reading bastard'."

"(Mind. Reading. Bastard.) All right. Let me put it nicely. Since you're creepier than a beheaded cockroach that keeps crawling up the wall, why don't you just swallow a can of insecticide whole and blow it up? That's right. It'll be a suicide that was carefully disguised as murder. Then I'll solve your case and be hailed as a hero."

"Death by insecticide explosion? I'd prefer not."

Mirald snickered and turned his attention to the voices of the soirée attendees in the floors below.

(We are chosen people, are we not? Is it not clear as day?)

(Eternal youth so close at hand...)

(I want to be powerful.)

(That foolish young man must be dead about now.)

(I would've loved to personally watch that idiot being murdered.)

(It'll be okay! I'm the most beautiful woman here! Mirald is going to like *me*! Damn it, I wish everyone else here was ugly as sin. Anyone who's prettier than I am can jump off a bridge.)

(I don't care what happens to all these people, but I can't get on the vampire's bad side—)

"Ah, yes. So many ambitious humans are gathered again."

(I can't believe that vampires really exist...)

(Oh Lord, please forgive me for participating in a vampire's soirée. But I do not think that he is truly an enemy of humankind.)

(I hear he can read people's thoughts. How much, though? I wonder if he can hear all this...)

(I don't need to become a vampire. I just want to be friends with Mr. Mirald.)

(Bastard wants me to believe he can actually read minds? I'll sell out that smug son of a bitch to the Church one day.)

"Ah, yes. Not only the lowest of the low, but the terrified, the gentle, the innocent virgins, and the spiteful... It's a wonderful night full of all sorts of voices! Cheers! I propose a toast to myself!"

"Anyway. What're we going to do now? We should get going soon." Dorrikey said, pulling a card from his pocket.

Written in red on the card was a message.

[I propose a meeting. All available Colors, gather at the Mars Family's country house in Southern Germany at midnight local time on the final day of the month.

-Gerhardt von Waldstein]

It was a simple call.

The two men were officers in an Organization created by vampires, and were responsible for other vampires in their area. Mirald and Dorrikey were not responsible for many, but some officers were in charge of hundreds of vampires. In that sense, the two were relatively free to move about.

"We got the invitation via telepathy. Through Hawking."

"I've always wondered: Hawking is supposed to be a sentient black hole, correct? Does he really exist? And can we really call him a vampire?"

"No one's seen him with their own eyes, but I can personally guarantee that his will is on a galactic scale. Any vampire capable of telepathy can communicate with him from any location, after all."

At that point, a certain voice entered his mind.

(Hm? Did you call?)

(No, Hawking.)

(I see. Have a good aeon, then.)

It was a conversation lasting 0.1 seconds.

After the short discussion, Mirald continued speaking before Dorrikey could even figure out that Hawking had chimed in.

"...And remember what Mr. Gerhardt said. 'If you think of particles of light as blood flowing through the universe, I see no reason why he shouldn't be considered a vampire'. So we're in no position to complain. Although I should apologize to Mr. Gerhardt."

"? ('Apologize'? What's he done now?)"

"Well, I don't think I can make it to the conference."

"What? *You*, reject Mr. Gerhardt's invitation? What are you up to?" Dorrikey asked, bewildered. Mirald grinned mischievously, his eyes narrowing.

"I'm really fond of Mr. Gerhardt, you know."

"(Is this guy gay?) If you're so fond of him, why don't you attend the conference?"

"For your information, I am straight. And I'm not attracted to liquid creatures, just to add. And as for your spoken question... when I heard that he passed on his position as Lord of Growerth to his son, I realized that I hadn't yet met the new lord in person."

"Lord of Growerth doesn't mean much at this point, especially since most humans don't even know about the position... And if you really want to drop by, why not when Mr. Gerhardt is not busy?"

"That wouldn't be any fun."

Mirald snickered and began to imagine what the new Lord of Growerth might be like.

"When I read Mr. Gerhardt's thoughts, I saw that he trusted his son. So is this relict—Melhilm's artificial weapon—worthy to reign as king over all vampires? Or is he an ambassador of peace who coexists with humans? It's *because* Mr. Gerhardt is away that this is the perfect opportunity to visit Growerth, no?"

"(Talk about a disgusting personality)..."

"Now, separated from the support of his powerful father, what does the artificial vampire Relic von Waldstein think? Heh heh... There's nothing as amusing as rudely listening in to people's thoughts!"

"(I hate this guy) Just go die already. As horribly as you can."

Mirald once more ignored Dorrikey's harsh comment and looked up at the moon.

"Now... before we go, let me listen just a little more to these avaricious voices."

And so, he turned his attention to the countless voices from below.

But at that point, a powerful, singular will echoed through his mind.

(Hungry)

"Hm?"

(I'm hungry. Hungry. Grumble. Rare meat. I'm hungry. I'm hungry. Rare meat. Rare meat rare meat rare meat rare meat rare meat rare meat. Meat. Meat. Meat. Meat. Meat—)

That was the extent of coherent thought. The rest of the individual's thoughts consisted of a rapid series of images of the individual's incredible hunger and the moment of finally getting to partake in meat.

"...Hey. Dorrikey."

"What."

"Your assistant is drooling over my guests."

"!! W-Watson?!"

Mirald watched his friend hurry down the stairwell and turned away.

James was kneeling, nearly back to his senses, looking up at Mirald blankly.

"You don't understand what just happened, I see. Well, Watson is... no. Why don't you just look into it yourself?"

Mirald looked down at James with neither sympathy nor scorn, but childlike curiosity. He shrugged.

"To you, I'm just a simple storyteller. That's why I'm not going to take your life. Like I said earlier, I'm not the one who murdered your beloved. But if you still can't forgive me... come back once you've grown. Although I can't guarantee that I would have grown by that point. I might end up playing tricks on you. But if that ever happens, I'll at least explain the situation you've gotten yourself into."

Remembering what just happened, James cried out and embraced himself, trembling.

In his mind flashed an image. The moment of his beloved's death.

Mirald looked at the vampire in the image, and shook his head. And instead of mocking the young man, he slowly began to turn himself into fog from the feet up.

The mysterious fog distorted the air, reflecting multiple moons in James's line of sight.

When the kaleidoscopic scene faded, James found himself hoping somehow that everything up to that point had been a hallucination.

Reading James's thoughts while in fog form, Mirald gave a wry chuckle and left his body to the winds.

'Now, then. Relic von Waldstein.'

'I guess I should go meet you now. And tell you a little about yourself.'

'Seeing as you're Mr. Gerhardt's son, I hope you know to be discreet.'

Chapter 1: The silver wolf doth savor!

Vampires were make-believe creatures.

That was what the woman believed—and would continue to believe for as long as she lived.

'Believe' was a somewhat misleading word.

After all, there was no hint of uncertainty in her opinion.

The woman *knew* that vampires did not exist.

It might be most accurate to say that she did not believe in things like vampires.

And so, the woman partied late into the nights. And that day, she again stepped out of her friend's house with a bit of alcohol in her system.

Though she was alone, she had come by car; she would be safe. She justified her intention to drive drunk by reminding herself that she was not even tipsy.

"Make sure the vampires don't get you." A man teased her, bringing up a traditional myth that had been part of the island for years.

"Better a vampire than a creep like you."

That was the last thing she said to her male friends.

"But seriously. It's dangerous out there. Be careful, okay?" Said her female friends, remembering the murder case they read about in the newspaper.

"Don't worry. The dead girl's ex-boyfriend or whatever's probably pissing himself scared in his room right about now."

That was the last thing she said to her female friends.

She had heard the news. A woman's body had been found somewhere on the island.

But she did not think it was something to worry about.

If the island was home to only a thousand people or so, she might have been scared.

But Growerth was a large island with a population of well over a hundred thousand. She believed that she could not be unlucky enough to be murdered, out of so many potential targets.

If she had known at that point that the police had found a second body, things might have been different. If she had known that a mysterious notice announcing a murder had been delivered to the police, things might have been different. If it had occurred to her that the murderer was not motivated by anger, but madness, she might have been extremely cautious.

But she believed. She tried her best to believe that a mere hope could be reality.

It was a large island, with a population of over one hundred thousand. What were the chances?

But the world betrayed her.

Vampires were make-believe creatures.

That was what the woman believed—and would continue to believe—for as long as she lived.

If she continued to live, that is.

Her corpse was found inside a dried-out well on the outskirts of the city.

It was clear that she was killed at the bottom of the well, but strangely enough, there were no signs of anyone climbing up or down—other than those of the police officers who went to retrieve her. There were no marks from ropes hung from the edges of the well, and the lid covering the well had been broken years ago and lost.

Perhaps small things like a chicken, or a single shoe, could have escaped; but there was no sign that an entire human being had climbed out from the well.

From the blood staining the walls of the well, it was clear that the woman was killed there.

That alone might have shed light on the possibility of multiple culprits, but the police were baffled by something else: The stone cover over the top of the well, which weighed in at several hundred kilograms.

There was no sign of any heavy machinery having been driven near the well. And if the stone lid had been brought there by human hands, just how many culprits were out there?

As talk of Satanists and cultists' rituals began to arise, the police began to investigate with multiple killers in mind.

But the people began to silently bring up rumors—rumors that became power that circulated through the streets.

Strangely enough, it was the very same rumor that had begun in southern Germany concerning the mass disappearances.

'Maybe vampires were behind the murders.'

Normally, such suggestions would have been easily laughed off. But the wounds on the victims' necks—marks that looked like they had been bitten—lent an eerily realistic tone to the rumor.

The investigators, of course, were not swayed. But some among the people began to truly fear something. And certain people involved with the media sniffed out that fear, independently making contact with the island.

It was as though they wanted to drag the island's darkness into the open, enjoying the people's fear from front-row seats.

†

"Mr. Mayor. Could you give us a comment on the recent serial killings?"

The press was camped out in front of City Hall. A bespectacled female reporter stepped up first with a question. The mayor, also wearing glasses that made him look quite intellectual, answered mechanically.

"The police are currently putting all their efforts into the investigation. However, I cannot guarantee if it will be minutes, days, or weeks before the case is solved. All I can say is that we will put a stop to these murders as soon as possible, so I would like to ask for the cooperation of every citizen on the island. Please take care to avoid walking around alone at night, and avoid deserted places."

Reciting a perfectly-practiced warning, Watt Stalf narrowed his eyes and continued emotionally.

"I'm sure many citizens are frustrated that the culprit has not yet been apprehended. But let it be said that we are *all* eager to put the killer behind bars."

The reporters bombarded the mayor with yet more questions.

The mayor cautiously answered them, a hint of anger in his voice, when the bespectacled reporter from earlier suddenly blurted out an outlandish question.

"Mr. Mayor. There are rumors that the culprit may be a vampire, or a werewolf—"

Normally, it might have been a strange question to ask.

Some people chuckled. But others looked quite serious.

Anyone who knew the details concerning the murders would think at least once:

'Was this really the work of humans?'

The incidents had begun only a week earlier.



On the first night, the first victim vanished.

Initially, it was thought that she had simply run away from home. But on the third night, she was discovered dead. Fear and worry began to course through the streets.

She was only the first victim. Two more women went missing in the past week, and both were found dead.

The victims were all women in their teens or twenties.

From their corpses, it was clear that they had died of blood loss from the wounds on their necks.

The grisly marks on their necks, which almost looked like their throats were torn by animals, furthered the horrific nature of the serial killings.

The wounds were clearly bite marks, but no saliva of any sort was found on them. Some news outlets decided to emphasize that mysterious fact.

The announcements sent to the media and the police only increased the scale of the commotion.

But the island of Growerth was the only place lost in this particular storm of confusion.

The attention of the mainland and the rest of the world had been seized by a more provocative incident elsewhere:

The mass disappearance in Southern Germany.

It was a case where the population of an entire village vanished, leaving behind a lone girl. The village was a cluttered mess, hinting that its inhabitants were no more. The entire world was shocked by the incident, and soon reporters from not only Germany, but across the globe, gathered in the area.

Some speculated that the incidents taking place on Growerth were caused by someone influenced by the case in Southern Germany. But once it was confirmed that the three serial killings were committed by the same person, who was also the one sending announcements to the police, the media finally began to move onto the island.

Naturally, the mayor could neither allow the situation to escalate nor allow any more citizens to be murdered.

"Vague rumors and misinformation only causes confusion in the city. I would like to ask that no one blow any gossip or speculation out of proportion." Watt Stalf said, expertly holding back his anger. He ended the press conference and disappeared inside City Hall.

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The mayor's office.

"So? Any idea who's behind all this?"

A woman's voice, light on emotion, greeted Watt as he stepped inside.

"If we could actually get something *concrete* for once..."

The woman was sitting in the mayor's chair, leaning so far back that the back of the chair looked just about ready to break. Her feet were on top of the mayor's mahogany desk. Though she was quite mature and voluptuous, there was a hint of youth in her face.

Playing on the television was footage of the reporter speaking in front of City Hall. The woman in the chair—Shizune Kijima—shot Watt a mocking glance.

Watt sighed quietly. He took out a pair of sunglasses from his breast pocket and switched out his non-prescription glasses.

His attitude did a 180 as he slammed on the desk, not even trying to hide his hostility.

"Things'd be fucking *simple* if *you* were the culprit. All I'd have to do is snuff you out right here and now—*oh*, the killer was an illegal immigrant and I was only defending myself. That'd solve every fucking problem."

Watt's tone, his expression, and even the air around him was completely different. And it was only because the woman was neither a citizen nor a human that he allowed his hidden self to surface.

Shizune, the Eater-turned-vampire, belligerently rejected his claim.

"Like I said before. *You're* at the top of my shit list. If I wanted to make a mess on the island, I'd have driven a tanker truck into City Hall by now."

She shot a murderous glare at the man who turned her into a vampire. Watt responded with a hostile look of his own.

"A *vampire* launching a *tanker truck* attack. I'm dying of laughter here. The decay must've spread all the way up your brain at this point; I thought I turned you into a vampire, not a fucking zombie."

"...It's strange. Right now, it's like you're trying too hard to make sarcastic comments."

"What?" The mayor spat, his brow furrowing. Shizune uncrossed and re-crossed her legs over the desk.

"I can practically hear your body going to pot."

"..."

Watt was silent. Shizune grinned condescendingly.

"Word on the street says you got your hands on Relic's powers. But I guess that was too good for your half-blood body."

"Too good' my ass. You're the one who's sitting in that chair without the citizens' support."

"A chair is a chair. Doesn't matter who's sitting in it."

"Same difference." Watt cracked his neck and showed off his sharp canines. "Power is power. Doesn't matter who's using it, whether it's me or Relic, that pampered little prince."

"But it's not like sitting in the mayor's chair's going to kill me... Anyway. Let's stop this. We're getting nowhere."

"I'd be just fine with an endless argument."

"I should just videotape this and send the footage to the press. Those poor citizens, having to find out that their sweet mayor was actually a foul-mouthed lowlife. A few of them just might die of shock."

Though she was the one who suggested that they end the argument, Shizune had wanted to end with a hostile comment. She finally stood.

"I'm heading back now. Try and stay alive, Mr. Mayor. If I don't kill you one day, anyway."

"You came all the way here to tell me something you don't even mean?"

"...I just came to tell you that I'm not responsible for your little mess. And one last thing to nag at you before I go—you know how I still have an Eater's senses?"

Eaters were human beings who crossed a forbidden line in the quest for power that surpassed those of vampires. They drank the blood and ashes of vampires to accept them into their own bodies, greatly enhancing their strength and reflexes. An Eater who had even once drank the blood of a vampire gained the ability to sense the presence of vampires, just as they heard sounds or smelled odors. Shizune had once walked that path in the quest for revenge, and even now—as the hunted rather than the hunter—her sixth sense remained with her.

Shizune grinned impishly and reported to the mayor the results of her 'scan'.

"I sensed a few vampires among the media camped out outside. I guess the dark side of the island has its eyes on the incident, too."

"..."

Watt was silent.

"Be careful, or you'll end up embarrassing yourself in front of people. Humans *and* vampires."

Shizune shrugged and stepped out of the mayor's office, her tone mocking to the end.

"I'll be cheering you on from the shadows, Mr. Mayor."

A series of text messages.

Pamela: [What did you think of the mayor's press conference, Master Dimguil?]

Dimguil: [It was unexpected. I had heard that the mayor was a rather uncouth man.]

Pamela: [That is only the face he shows to humans. As a vampire, he is violence incarnate.]

Dimguil: [I see.]

Pamela: [Ultimately, he is but a petty villain and a dhampyr. Too trifling a man for you to concern yourself with, Master.]

Dimguil: [That is not for you to decide.]

Pamela: [My humblest apologies for daring to overstep my bounds.]

Dimguil: [Not to worry, Pamela. In any case, what of the castle?]

Pamela: [Security seems to be somewhat lax, Master. Werewolves patrolling the premises at most.]

Dimguil: [I see. Then we won't have any problems.]

Pamela: [They are a rabble of impulsive brutes. It will be but child's play for you to obliterate them, Master Dimguil.]

Dimguil: [Do not confuse our goals, Pamela. Today, we are here only to observe.]

Pamela: [My apologies.]

Dimguil: [In any event, I am looking forward to seeing just how splendid this rare beast called 'Relic' truly is.]

†

Growerth was a large island in the North Sea, under the jurisdiction of Germany.

Not only was it a prominently large island, it was also under development as a tourist destination. It was also actively establishing sister cities overseas in countries like Japan, America, Italy, and China.

Including Neuberg, several cities were on the island, upon which was everything from streets resembling the Middle Ages to modern-day civic centers and hotels. The cities were also surrounded by scenic displays of nature—about the only kind of environments missing from the island were deserts and glaciers.

Of course, there were no skyscrapers on the island—other than the city hall building, five-story hotels were about as tall as they went. And yet not a single room was vacant during

the busy tourist season. Old buildings by the large streets that had been renovated into hotels were also quite popular with visitors.

In more recent years, the annual festival had become such a success that the island was rapidly transforming into a tourist hotspot. Local opinion on the development was still mixed.

Many small peaks rose up near the center of the island, covered with deciduous trees. And near the top of a peak on the southern side of the island was a large castle taken straight out of the Middle Ages. Waldstein Castle, the symbol of Growerth and one of its most popular tourist destinations.

Its majestic beauty harmoniously blended with the viridian forests and mountains. Countless visitors lost themselves in its wondrous sights as they stepped into the storybook setting.

Thanks to the fact that many works of art by Growerth's very own Carnald Strassburg were displayed on the premises, Waldstein Castle was considered the most prominent sightseeing destination on the island known for its rich culture.

But most people had no idea.

That the castle was not merely the boundary between industry and nature—it was the boundary between the world of humanity and the dark world of 'Others'.

And that the vampire who reigned over the island sat in the throne in the residential area as the lord of the castle.

Relic von Waldstein.

He was the adopted son of the former lord, Gerhardt von Waldstein, and the current master of Waldstein Castle.

But was he in this seat of his own accord? There was no clear answer.

His adopted father had also offered to also pass down the title of 'viscount'. But titles were normally downgraded a rank when they were passed down. And to add, the title of 'viscount' did not exist in Germany, except for one exceptional case when it was accorded by the King of France. Gerhardt explained that this was the reason why the Emperor granted him this title—'A title that should not exist, for a creature that should not exist'.

[Considering the unusual circumstances, I do not believe any human would be particularly upset about my handing down this title of viscount to you as it is, my son.] Gerhardt had said irresponsibly, but Relic could not agree.

Other vampires could turn themselves into fog or flocks of bats with ease; Relic's powers, though identical, could do so on a grander scale—transforming the entire island and controlling it like a part of his own body.

He was a being worthy of the envy of all creatures, not just vampires. The boy created to be a vampire among vampires sat in the throne that symbolized his position, and—

Sighed loudly as he listened to a maid's lecture.

"...I never thought I'd still be studying at this age."

Sitting in the large throne with his knees bent in front of him, Relic complained without thinking.

There was a high but narrow desk set up in front of the throne. Atop the ornately designed piece of furniture was everything from old notebooks to parchment papers to a high-end laptop.

Relic sighed again at the sight of the mound of information. A vampire dressed in a green maid uniform pushed up her glasses.

"Master Relic. In human years, you are still young enough to be attending school. Life is a never-ending journey of learning. You have nearly an eternity to continue to learn and teach others."

"Hearing that makes the rest of my life sound so tiresome. Although it's true I need to learn more about this stuff, whatever it is I end up doing in the future."

Though he was reluctant, Relic acknowledged the point of his education and turned to the notebook in his hands. It was crammed full of tiny letters, and anyone who knew German could tell that it was a research paper of some sort.

Suddenly, the letters grew hazy.

Realizing that a thick fog had settled around him, Relic chuckled.

"Did you come to play, Pirie? Sorry, but this stuff might end up boring you even more."

He had spoken to thin air.

But no one in the castle thought strangely of patches of fog materializing indoors. And if the fog happened to be colorful, with patches of red and blue, they could instantly tell that a certain freeloader was behind the phenomenon.

"Aww... What's this, Relic? What is it? If it's that boring, you should quit. Just put it down!"

A high-pitched voice echoed from the fog. It was not coming from inside the haze, but from the haze itself.

The voice and the fog gathered and materialized, and soon a girl in colorful clothing appeared next to the maid in green.

The clownlike vampire—Pirie Mistwalker—returned to physical form. Twirling in place, she smiled at Relic.

"Say? Whatcha doing?"

"Well, I'm studying about vampires."

"Really? Why now? Did you want to learn more about yourself?" The jester wondered. The bespectacled maid answered in Relic's place.

"Even humans study about their own bodies, Miss Pirie. Of course, in this case, Master Relic is studying social science rather than biology."

"Hm? I don't get it."

Pirie tilted her head, then rotated her head a full 360 degrees. She had probably turned her neck into fog, but it was a sight that might kill the faint of heart.

Relic, already used to such things, smiled kindly.

"Have you ever heard of Clans? Not the word 'clan', but the term used for groups of vampires."

"Hmm... Mmm... Oh... Oh! I think I've heard of them! Master Watt used to kick his chair, muttering about 'Fucking Clan assholes'! He said 'Fucking Organization assholes' a lot too, so I thought they were the same thing. Weren't they?"

The Organization was a group founded by Relic's adoptive father Gerhardt. It had no name, and was a gathering of vampires considered unusual even by their peers. But it boasted a membership of over twenty thousand—the undisputed leader when it came to size alone.

Relic was created as a result of one of the Organization's experiments. But he had come to terms with his origins already, and no longer held any particular feelings toward the Organization.

"Yeah. Clans are separate from the Organization. And they're not on very good terms, either. ...Although I only just learned about it, so maybe things aren't so bad after all."

"You are still a little lacking in knowledge, Master Relic." The maid said with a smile as Relic grinned sheepishly. "But Master Gerhardt deserves some of the blame as well. To think he hadn't spoken of the Clans to you or Miss Ferret... And to think that he allowed the two of you to travel overseas without that knowledge. The next time he comes to the island, I will have to give him a stern lecture."

The maid was smiling, and sounded quite pleasant. But Relic still had the feeling that she was quite angry with Gerhardt. He shrank back.

"...I'm sorry. I'll study hard and learn all the details."

"You truly are honest, Master Relic. I'm sure you'll one day become a beloved lord."

Smiling honestly this time, the maid turned to Pirie and handed her some documents as well.

"Since you're here, Miss Pirie, why not join the lesson? Let us learn about Clans."

†

Countless vampires existed all over the world.

Some numbered them at about fifty thousand, but that was not a large number at all.

And very few of these vampires had the terrifying powers humans came to expect from cartoons and movies. Most were easily hunted by a mob of angry villagers.

The Organization was founded by such vampires in order to protect themselves from human persecution. Presently, there were about one hundred officers and twenty thousand members. There were different factions within the Organization as well—those who saw humans as food, those with a grudge against humans, those who dreamed of coexisting with humans, and many others. Due to the influence of Gerhard—the current chairman—the most prominent of the many stances was the one that antagonized humans as little as possible.

Meanwhile, there were other groups of vampires called 'Families' or 'Clans', which were very much like aristocratic human families.

As the word implied, Clan members considered themselves family. Clans were composed of vampires with blood relations, humans turned by a family member, and witches and werewolves under their subjugation.

There were no precise standards, but communities numbering at over thirty members—including children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren—were called 'Clans'. According to the Organization, seven were currently in existence.

The Viradis Clan based in Eastern Europe, which boasted over a hundred members and over a thousand servants.

The Xiang Clan of China, which was too numerous to be numbered and which held great influence over human society.

The Chagzulu Clan, with a massive territory that spanned the coasts of the African continent.

The infamously exclusive Aleksandros Clan, based in multiple places in Russia, Europe, and America.

The mysterious Kumanobe Clan of Japan, whose base was unknown and which participated little in human society.

The Sunford Clan, which was openly hostile to the Organization and which treated humans as nothing more than prey.

The all-female Shreemeice Clan, which also accepted unrelated vampires into their midst so long as they were female.

Most Clans saw humans as lower lifeforms and abhorred the Organization.

One reason was that Clan members prided themselves on being 'true' vampires, just like the ones from movies and stories. The Organization, which accepted purebloods and dhampyr alike, and even dogs, spiders, and watermelons as members, was little more than a group of disorganized hoodlums in their eyes.

The Xiang Clan and the Shreemeice Clan were more neutral to the Organization, occasionally even sharing information with them.

"There were more of them in the past, but these seven are the only true Clans left today. Several in the United States were assimilated into the Organization—because many vampires cannot cross the ocean, there were relatively few vampires in the Americas to begin with. Others, like the Hijiribe Clan in Japan, intermingled with humans to the point that they dissipated naturally. The Ridlock Clan of the west was eradicated by another Clan. Romy Mars of the Organization was originally part of a Clan herself, but because she is the only surviving member, the Mars Family is no longer counted as a Clan."

Pirie gasped in wonder at the maid's lecture. Relic nodded.

"I see... So the surviving Clans are powerful organizations in their own right."

"The Viradis Clan poses the greatest threat to the Organization, and the Xiang Clan is keeping their power in check by often interacting with the Organization. The Shreemeice Clan maintains a position of absolute neutrality, and poses little danger as well."

Relic chuckled.

"An all-female Clan, huh? They're just like the Amazons. Forget neutrality, I'd almost like to be friendly with them." He joked.

The jester, who had been listening quietly next to him, shrieked.

"NO! Relic, you can't cheat on Hilda! I'm going to tell on you~!"

"What?! N-no, that's not—"

Even the maid chuckled.

"Oh? Then what were you thinking of, Master Relic?"

"Uh... well."

Relic was at a loss for words. The jester snickered. She partly turned her body into fog and wrapped herself around him.

"Well, you're a guy too, Relic. Maybe you want to play lord properly and hoard all the girls to yourself! And, and, and! Every night you'd— ...Ohh! What are you making me say? You're awful, Relic! You studnoodle, you!"

"Studnoodle'...?"

Pirie prattled meaninglessly, lightly punching Relic in the head. Though Relic's dignity as Lord of Waldstein Castle was no more, the maid looked on warmly.

"Ouch, Pirie. That hurts! Anyway, I'm surprised you listened to that lecture about Clans so quietly."

"Hm? But it's fun to learn about stuff I didn't know!"

It was a surprising answer from someone in such garish clothing.

"If I don't know a lot of things, I can't trick people perfectly. It's not right to play tricks if I don't know everything!"

"Huh. So *that's* what goes on in that head of yours." Relic laughed, and turned to the maid.

"I have a question."

"Yes, Master?"

The maid bowed politely. Relic spoke up hesitantly.

"Uh... well... would I be nothing special to those Clan vampires?"

"..."

The maid's smile faltered slightly. Silence followed.

"I, uh... I don't think I'm anyone that special, but... there's the reason I was made by the Organization and all, and... and I thought that maybe the Clans might not be too happy with someone like me."

Relic was the product of the Organization's experimentation.

That did not mean that he was a clone or an artificial creature of some sort—he was the result of a generations-long breeding program. A thoroughbred of vampires, so to speak.

He was created to be like the Clan vampires—possessing all sorts of abilities held by vampires of myth and legend, wielding absolute power. A jack *and* master of all trades.

Being a vampire created to reign as king over others, there was a good chance that the Clans—who claimed pureblood status for themselves—saw Relic as a nuisance.

The maid thought for a moment and carefully chose her words, revealing only what she knew to be true.

"Allow me to be honest, Master Relic. Of the Clans I described to you, the less favorably disposed they are to the Organization, the more hostile they will be towards you."

"I guess that makes sense." Relic said with a quiet sigh, not sounding particularly unhappy.

Considerate of the emotions Relic was trying to hide, the maid continued.

"But not all Clans will see you in a negative light, Master. The Xiang Clan and the Chagzulu Clan are rather different as far as vampiric traits go, and are less likely to show hostility."

The Shreemeice Clan seems to be rather wary of you, but that is likely because you are male. In fact, they once contacted Master Gerhardt, saying 'we are willing to take the female twin into our care'. Master Gerhardt saw that they were purely intending to protect Miss Ferret as opposed to trying to take her hostage."

"Really?"

"Of course, Master Gerhardt declined their offer. But in that sense, it may be acceptable to see the Shreemeice Clan as a neutral party."

"I see..."

After a moment's silence, Relic chuckled.

"Now I'd like to get to know them even more. I'm sure their members must be very beautiful."

"Reliiiiic?" The jester growled.

Relic was prepared to have her wrap herself around him again, but Pirie put on a mischievous smile and leaned into his face provocatively. Relic froze.

"I get it now, Relic! I totally get it!"

"Wh-what?"

"Oh, Relic. It actually kind of hurt your feelings, didn't it? When you heard that these people you never met hate you anyway? That's why you keep talking about those girls—so we'd end up talking about Hilda instead! Because you thought you could fool yourself into feeling better once the conversation warmed up! But I got you! Tee hee! You should have just called Hilda and told her that you missed her from the beginning, Relic!"

"..."

The jester must have hit the nail on the head. Relic averted his gaze without a word. If he were human, he would have flushed beet-red by now.

Pirie gently butted heads with Relic and giggled.

"You have to take good care of Hilda, Relic. It doesn't matter if she's human or a vampire—I really really like her. And she's really serious about you, so you have to be serious about her too!"

"Pirie..."

"How're you going to be a good lord if you can't make Hilda happy? Ahahahaha! You're such an idiot, Relic."

The jester continued laughing, partly dissipating once more and going around behind Relic.

She then gave him a push on the back, forcing him to his feet.



"You're a *vampire*, Relic! People you've never met before call vampires monsters, so don't worry about a few people who hate you! Hilda and Michael care for you so much! Don't be greedy—you don't have to be loved by every person in the entire world! Ahahahahaha!"

As the jester laughed maniacally, Relic's eyes widened. He then mumbled self-deprecatingly,

"Thank you, Pirie."

He asked the maid for permission to leave, and stepped out of the throne room.

Relic von Waldstein was a vampire.

That would not change, even if humanity or vampirekind were to die out.

But as he thought of the girl who loved him like an ordinary human—the girl he loved above all else—a sad smile crept onto his face.

'Heh... I wish I wasn't such a coward.'

'Someone always has to give me a little push.'

He would go see Hilda.

With but one thought in mind, Relic turned his body into a flock of bats under the early evening skies.

The vestiges of sunlight in the west stung his skin, but Relic endured it as he flew over to the village.

Would he turn Hilda into a vampire? Or would he love her as she was?

Still not even close to a decision on their future, the boy only followed his instincts to see her once more.

Seeing Relic off, the maid pushed up her glasses and turned to the jester.

"That was rather nosy of you."

"Just like you! You and the other maids are cheering them on too, right? Tee hee!"

"You're a gentle spirit, Miss Pirie. To be frank, I'm not sure why someone so kind and clever as you are is so obsessed with a man like Watt Stalf."

"EEK! No! No, no! You can't insult Master Watt like that!"

Pirie pouted, then began spinning in midair as she spread her arms, listing off the things she loved about Watt.

"Master Watt is petty, nasty, selfish, boorish, vulgar, rude, violent, petty, proud, arrogant, ready to chop people, awful, petty, and always obsessed with the past, but I still think he's great!"

"I'd like to point out that you said 'petty' three times. I agree with your observation, but I will apologize for insulting the man you so admire."

The maid gave a heartfelt apology and bowed. The jester moaned in frustration.

"I guess the people in this castle really don't like Master Watt."

The maid thought for a moment, and gave an honest answer.

"So long as Master Gerhardt does not dislike him, I am hopeful that he is little worse than a nuisance. And as for his face as a human... I admit that he is doing an acceptable job as the mayor of Neuberg. ...And I am not averse to changing my mind, if he would think to work for the island even while wearing the face of a vampire."

†

Growerth. Harbor area.

(Not good. I'm so tired...)

(I need a fuck.) (Man, I'm hungry.)

(Shit. Wish they'd all just die.) (I don't feel like working...)

(Am I ever gonna get to play a round?) (Ugh. Does this jackass think I'm his girl or something?)

(I'd better start thinking about what to do once Grandpa passes away...) (The culprit must have been a vampire.) (Maybe I should just die.) (Was the mayor single? He's pretty young.) (Going home makes me feel so depressed.) (Muyifendoahahahahahaha! Man, I just wanna shout something nobody'll understand.)

(I'm surprised she hasn't figured out that I'm cheating on her.) (Wonder if I can flip that girl's skirt.) (I want to hurry up and get out of the boonies here. I want to live in the *city*.) (I'm craving sausages.) (Oh my oh my oh my.) (Wonder if Dad really thinks Mom doesn't know he's cheating on her...) (Wish he'd just die already.) (Maybe I should go grab my savings from the bank while I'm at it...) (I'm surprised he hasn't figured out that I've been squeezing rag water into his soup since yesterday for cheating on me.) (Who's that freak with the goggles?)

(I want to die.) (Sweet!)

(I really want to do something, but...) (Or maybe the killer is somewhere in this crowd.)

(If someone jumps out of there and tries to mug me, I'll dodge this way and—)

"Ah... How relaxing. Such pleasant air."

Mirald leaned against a streetlamp in front of the harbor's shopping district, his mind lost in the countless 'sounds of the heart' around him.

In the garbled noise made of countless emotions, he picked up each and every tone and smiled as though he were listening to a piece of classical music.

(—or someone is reading my mind. ...I already know you're looking into my head! Or something like that. Heh.)

Hearing such thoughts from a boy in the area, Mirald mischievously sent out a thought—"So you've noticed!"

The boy flinched; he looked around in confusion, then ran off, terrified.

"That was a little cruel of me. Then again, he'll probably think he was just hearing things." Mirald said to himself. Someone came up to him.

"(Ugh... I still feel sick)Hey. Are you reading *every mind* in the area?"

Dorrikey was clearly in bad shape. Mirald answered immediately.

"I can shut them out if I want to."

"(Urgh... I should have come by freight in my coffin...)...I'm surprised you haven't gone insane yet. Mind-readers in films and novels never like crowds."

"It feels pretty good once you get used to it. It's like the roar of a vacuum cleaner suddenly becoming a soothing lullaby to your ears. ...Anyway, are you all right? You can't stand running water. If you were much weaker, you would have turned to ashes already."

Many vampires were weak against flowing water, like rivers and oceans. Although most of such vampires could evade the weakness by flying over water as a flock of bats or using vehicles like ships or airplanes, those like Dorrikey were weakened by the mere act of traveling over flowing water.

"(I'm going to puke. Ohh...)Hah! I logically determined that I would survive the crossing. It's only that I didn't expect the motion sickness. Damn you, running water—my greatest enemy..."

"Why did you come all the way here? You'd have been better off going to Mr. Gerhardt's conference. The only thing I'm reading in that mind of yours are complaints about your seasickness."

It was a natural question to ask. Dorrikey struggled to stand, straightening out his back.

"(Urgh... I feel sick)Hahaha! It's because you rely too much on your telepathy that you're incapable of deduction. I thought it might be a good idea to look into the mass disappearance in southern Germany, but there also happens to be a very peculiar serial killing case occurring on this island as well!"

His condition improved as he took deep breaths. Enthusiasm began to tint Dorrikey's voice.

"(A mysterious serial killer who continues to evade the police... How the islanders must be trembling in fear! But now, they can set aside their worries! The Ace Detective is here!)Where there's an Ace Detective, there is crime! Where there is crime, there is an Ace Detective!"

"You're still too decent of a person to be a vampire. Now if only you could do something about your constant dogging at false leads..."

Mirald chuckled and sighed at Dorrikey's sincere wish to solve the case for the people of Growerth.

Suddenly, something occurred to him. He turned.

"Now that I think about it... I don't see your assistant anywhere."

The self-proclaimed Ace Detective struggled to turn his head. He carefully observed his surroundings.

Finally realizing that the partner who had been with him on the ferry was missing, he deduced that he was in a rather difficult situation.

"W-WATSON?!"

†

At the same time. A residential area by the harbor.

"...I'm lost." Mumbled a silver-haired girl of about fourteen or fifteen.

She had short, very curly hair hidden underneath her bowler hat. She was also wearing a suit of a very old design, which could pass easily for one made for men. That was why she looked like a boy from a distance—however, from up close, her features made it clear that she was female. There was a strangely downcast air in her expression, but the youthful look of her face made her look more sad than depressed.

Her name was Watson.

'Watson' was not her real name. It was one given to her by the man who obtained her—Key Dorrikey—who claimed that *"It's the only proper name for a detective's assistant"*.

She did not know her real name, and she had no memories of her parents. In fact, she did not know completely just what kind of a creature she was.

But she knew clearly that currently, she was dressed to look like a detective's assistant named Watson. Of course, she did not know exactly what a detective's assistant was.

Things were fine until she came to Growerth alongside Dorrikey, but she was distracted by the scent of a sausage truck that was driving down the street. She was easily separated from the others, which led up to this moment in time.

She realized that she was alone only when the truck stopped at the square. But all she did was mumble, "I'm lost", sounding content enough in knowing her present state.

Grumble.

Hearing the sound from her stomach, she produced a small purse from her pocket.

She opened the zipper and turned the purse upside-down. There was nothing but dust.

"..."

Placing a hand on her growling stomach, the silver-haired girl began to wander the square.

"Hey there. That's a weird outfit you've got on—something happen?"

She was approached by a group of slightly older boys, who looked to be delinquents trying to hit on her.

Watson sniffed. She noted that the boys were not carrying any food with them.

"..."

"C'mon, say something. The name's Hans—I'm pretty popular around the schools here."

The well-muscled boy snickered as he took hold of Watson's shoulder. She replied,

"You don't look tasty."

"Wha?"

Hans frowned. The boy next to him threateningly grabbed Watson by the chin.

"Don't think we'll go easy on you just because you're younger than us, bitch. Hans here's gone through everyone from brats like you to ladies old enough to be your grandmother."

He tried to push her chin to the side in a show of strength—but it was as though he had grabbed onto a solid tree branch. She would not budge.

Something growled as the boys felt a warm breeze on their faces.

"H-hey..."

Hans and his cronies noticed something; they took a step backwards.

"What?"

The delinquent with his hand on Watson's chin cast her a casual glance.

And at that moment, his thoughts came grinding to a halt.

Right before his eyes was the girl's face, slightly different from before.

Fangs glinted between her lips, covered in saliva. The color of her eyes were shifting into an inhuman shade.

The girl's expression remained the same. But her shrinking pupils stared a hole through the boy's.

"...Let go."

Even her voice began to change. And with that, her hand lightly took hold of his wrist. 'Lightly' being from the girl's perspective.

"Urgh...!"

His wrist caught in a vice-like grip, the boy's body was forcibly bent back.

At that moment, the other delinquents noticed something.

Silver fur began to cover the girl's hand. Her fingernails were growing hooked, and her hand had doubled in size.

"Agh... Arghhh...!"

She was not human.

Though the boys were residents of Growerth, they did not know about the existence of vampires.

But even with their ordinary upbringings, they could tell for certain—the girl was not human.

"...You definitely don't look tasty."

Sensing the texture of the boy's arm, the girl mumbled to herself and flung him aside. The delinquent was sent flying several meters by the girl, who was shorter than he was.

The other people in the square began to turn, wondering what was going on.

Hans, the leader of the delinquents, was silent for a few moments.

"AAAAAAAAAHHHHHHH?!"

Then, he cried out and forcibly snapped his body out of its frozen state.

The boys turned tail and ran off at once.

"..."

As the boys left, Watson returned her hand and face to their original forms.

She was a werewolf and a partner to Key Dorrikey, but she had no idea just what she was in relation to human society.

The people around them at first gave their attention to the fleeing boys. But one by one their eyes began to return to the girl in strange clothing.

"?"

Watson cocked her head, wondering what to do. But the swell of hunger in her gut stopped her train of logical thought.

Perhaps she should tear off the limbs from the more tasty-looking onlookers, Watson was beginning to think.

At that moment, a stranger took her by the hand and pulled her aside.

"Over here!"

Running with the werewolf's hand in hers was a girl slightly older than Watson.

Watson hesitated for a moment, but hoping that the stranger was going to feed her, she decided to follow along.

†

After a short dash through the streets, the two girls came to a stop in a narrow alleyway.

The older girl took a moment to catch her breath and smiled at Watson.

"Are you all right? I dragged you along because I thought you might cause a bit of a commotion."

"..."

'She's a little skinny. But she looks tasty.'

'But if I bite her. Dorrikey will get mad.'

Not knowing just what kind of grisly thoughts were going through the werewolf's mind, the older girl grinned.

"My name's Hilda. I live on this island. And you are...?"

"...Watson."

"That's a funny name. Do you live here?"

Watson shook her head.

"I came on the ferry. I got separated."

It was a mechanical answer. Hilda made to ask about Watson's implied companions, but was interrupted by a grumble.

Watson's stomach growled as sadness tinted her eyes.

"I'm hungry."

Her emotionless mask had given way for the first time, and to a look of sorrow—of all things.

Not knowing in her wildest dreams that she was being treated as 'emergency rations', Hilda gently spoke to Watson.

"Would you like to get something to eat? I can buy you a bit of food, if you'd like."

Watson's eyes began to sparkle as she silently upgraded the girl from 'emergency rations' to 'a nice person who feeds me(don't eat her)'.

Following her instincts, the werewolf named her food of choice.

"Raw meat."

†

Harbor area.

"This is terrible... positively dreadful... If Watson were to kill someone in her hunger, my reputation as a detective will be ruined! I'm not wealthy enough to somehow compensate the victim's family, and above all else, could Watson even be sent to a human prison in the first place? Can she even make up for her crimes? No—before all that, is there even a way to make up for the loss of life?"

The self-proclaimed Ace Detective wandered the streets, muttering to himself.

"Mirald. Couldn't you find her with your telepathy? I'm sure she's rambling to herself about her hunger."

"Hate to tell you, but even my telepathy has a limited range. She's not in the area—if she's still alive, that is."

Dorrikey grabbed Mirald by the collar and growled,

"If that was a joke, it wasn't a funny one. I hate the thought of my assistant dying more than the thought of her killing someone. (This isn't good! What if she tried to hurt someone and ended up being retaliated against by the local vampires?)"

After his surprisingly serious outburst, Dorrikey was once again back to being a nervous wreck. Mirald mumbled a brief apology and shook Dorrikey aside.

Then.

(Hey, that's the park they showed on TV.)

(I got a text saying Hans and the guys got attacked by a girl. That was real?)

Hearing several quite similar thoughts at the same time, Mirald turned his attention to the convergence point.

There was an electronics store in one of the shops nearby, with televisions displayed inside.

Gesturing at Dorrikey(who was still muttering to himself), Mirald pointed him over to the televisions.

And on the screens, they saw—

†

The mayor's office.

<This is Juna Riebeluka from ZZZ Network, reporting to you live from Neuberg City Square. A violent incident seems to have just taken place here, as the city continues to be terrorized by the mysterious serial killings. A young man was left with thankfully mild injuries, but we're receiving strange eyewitness accounts describing a young girl's transformation into a fur-covered monster. Here are some interviews with locals on the scene.>

"...Which shit-for-brains werewolf was that?"

Watt sighed loudly as he spotted a familiar city square on the television while doing his work.

He determined that the victim was not hallucinating or making up tall tales—Watt was sure that a young werewolf really did nearly reveal herself to the public. That was the simplest conclusion.

"Shit. As if the serial killings weren't fucked-up enough to scare the piss out of people. Relic, that incompetent little—"

Though he complained out loud about Relic, Watt was inwardly afraid that perhaps the werewolf was one of those under his influence. But none of his subordinates were young girls, and none of them had any daughters.

He breathed a sigh of relief, but then came the next question.

'What if she's from outside?'

'What if she transformed because she didn't know the rules around here?'

'Is this the Organization's doing? Do they never get sick of invading this island?'

By the time he began to wonder if this had something to do with the serial killings, the word 'vampire' happened to be mentioned on the news program.

<They say that this island has a long history of myths involving vampires and werewolves. Could there be a connection? Perhaps someone is going around in disguise as a vampire or a werewolf.>

'Hey, hey. Why the hell're you jumping to vampires now?'

'And who the hell would dress up as a werewolf girl to beat up a man, dumbass?'

'Fuck it. ZZZ Network—if you're gonna waste money reporting, chase some real leads for once.'

Now that he thought about it, the reporter was the same woman who had asked him about vampires earlier that day at the press conference.

Adding ZZZ Network to his list of nuisances, the mayor returned to his duties.

But the news about the werewolf continued to bother him. He ground his teeth and glanced out the window.

There was Waldstein Castle, the symbol of the island.

Some of the lamps were lit, supposedly for security purposes. With a click of the tongue, Watt grumbled to himself.

"I should have a talk with that wet-behind-the-ears prince..."

†

Harbor area. Shopping district.

<We'll be following not only the mysterious serial killings, but also this strange incident that occurred at the square this evening. This is Juna Riebeluka, signing off from the island of Growerth.>

When the bespectacled woman finished, the screen cut to ZZZ Network's studio. Several people were discussing something, but Mirald shrugged and turned to Dorrikey.

(That was obviously your partner just now.)

Because he did not want anyone to overhear the conversation, he broadcast the thought straight into Dorrikey's mind.

(...Wait a moment. Don't let prejudices color your deductions. As we all know, there is a large werewolf population on this island. In other words, another werewolf may be responsible for the incident. Or perhaps this was a trick involving a twin switch. The culprit is on this island!)

(Calm down.)

Mirald sent an image of a peaceful, flowing stream into Dorrikey's mind to settle his thoughts. After a moment's confusion, Dorrikey finally got a hold of himself and sighed loudly.

(Oh, Watson... How many times have I told her that she mustn't transform into a werewolf? It's a complete infringement of Knox's Decalogue—)

(You're one to talk, Dorrikey—what's one measly werewolf transformation when you're the one who always subjugates those involved in a crime to reveal the answer? Well, anyway. I have a problem on my hands.)

(What might that be?)

Dorrikey shot him a dubious look. Mirald shook his head.

(Well... You know that I have to regularly quench my thirst for blood at my soirées—taking care to not turn the human in the process.)

(Of course—I was there myself, after all. You only need it once a month, but who *hasn't* heard of your addiction to sucking blood? ...Wait. Wait a second.)

(That's right. Well, hmm... Remember that intruder? James something-or-other? We left for Growerth right after that commotion.)

(Don't tell me.)

Mirald grinned, embarrassed, and shot Dorrikey's mind a pleasant smile.

(I'm itching to suck some blood very soon.♥)

†

Night. A park.

"You must have been starving."

"...It's tasty."

The girl munched happily on the raw meat they picked up at a nearby butcher. Watching her, Hilda thought to herself.

'I guess the people who were with her must have been vampires or werewolves.'

In the deserted park, Hilda recalled the sight of the young girl in the square, her arm suddenly taking on bestial form as she tossed aside a boy even larger than she was.

At first, Hilda thought to step in and help the girl. But seeing what happened, she quickly realized that Watson was a werewolf and dragged her away before a commotion arose.

She had never met this non-human girl before.

Normally, that might have been reason enough for Hilda to be on edge. But she was rather unusual in that she was particularly close to the 'Others' that lived on the island. Not only was she familiar with vampires and werewolves, she was on very good terms with them. Though her parents were always worried for her sake, her older brother Michael was even less cautious about vampires—and he was very much beloved by the 'Others' of Growerth.

That was why to Hilda, werewolves and vampires were little different from humans.

Of course, if Watson were a grown man, Hilda might have been more nervous for a different reason. But werewolf or human, Watson was ultimately just a girl a little younger than herself.

It was when her thoughts had reached that point that Hilda had taken the girl's hand and fled the square—remembering the face of the vampire she loved, knowing that, in the worst-case-scenario, she could discuss the problem with Relic.

And things came to this moment.

Hilda nearly lost herself in the lovable sight of Watson savoring her meal.

Although she almost wanted to show this scene to others, it might be rather difficult for people to agree with her assessment when the adorable being in question was chewing on raw meat.

'Michael would probably agree, though.'

'...I wonder if he's all right.'

Her expression darkened as she remembered her brother.

Michael was on the mainland, doing a part-time job for a group of vampires called the Organization. Hilda's close friend Ferret had also left the island, intent on bringing him back, but she had not contacted her home since.

Recalling that she had found Watson just as she was thinking of discussing Michael and Ferret with Relic after shopping for groceries, Hilda began to go over her next course of action.

'Relic might know something... about both Michael and Ferret.'

At that point, Hilda began to doubt herself.

'I wonder... am I relying too much on Relic?'

She had been involved many times now in incidents involving vampires. And each time, she was rescued by her boyfriend Relic. And now, Relic had become the Lord of Growerth. Although she didn't know exactly what the position entailed (and Relic echoed her sentiment), it was clear that countless vampires, werewolves, witches, and hags were under his authority.

They were supposed to be relying on each other, but wasn't she now being supported solely by Relic? Perhaps she was being a burden to him.

Relic himself never said such things. But having been helped by him many times, Hilda was beginning to question herself.

She was afraid that, perhaps, she was a nuisance to him. But Hilda could not think of anything that an ordinary human like her could do.

Lost in unhappy thoughts, she sighed without thinking.

Long, pale fingers stroked her cheek.

"...Watson."

Watson was staring, tilting her head. She was worried for Hilda.

"...Are you hungry?" She asked, holding out the bag of meat. Hunger must have been the greatest cause of sadness she could imagine.

"N-no thank you, Watson! I'm sorry. I was just thinking about some things..."

Hilda quickly sat up straight and smiled.

'What a sweet girl.'

'I'm sure I'll be able to find her companions soon.'

Deciding to discuss the matter with Relic after all, Hilda turned her attention to Watson's meal once more.

Though the sight of Watson munching on the red meat was undeniably adorable, there was something quite awkward about it all.

"Is it really all right for you to eat all that meat raw?"

"..."

Watson nodded, wordlessly chewing on her food.

Supposing that she should listen to Watson's side of the story while she was still eating, Hilda asked her a simple question.

"What kind of people did you come to the island with? Umm... other werewolves? Vampires? Or humans?"

It wasn't clear if Watson would answer honestly, but the conversation would not begin without a response.

Watson stopped for a moment. She cocked her head and fell into thought for about ten seconds.

Then, sounding quite unsure herself, she described her partner.

"...Ace... Detective?"

"An Ace Detective?"

It was an unexpected answer. Hilda paused.

"Oh. That's why you're Watson." She replied with a stilted answer of her own.

Not knowing that she would end up being part of the case that the Ace Detective had claimed for himself.



Interlude 1: The dhampyr doth encounter!

Watt Stalf was a petty man.

He knew this himself, and was quite content to be one.

[The noblest of petty villains], the former Lord of Waldstein Castle had once described him.

Because Watt knew himself to be petty, he could take on any heavyweight that stood before him.

Though he called himself petty, he did not give up on his goals. In fact, it was because he believed himself small that he could continue to challenge the heavyweights that others dared not approach.

He ran for the mayoral elections without a single sponsor, and pulled off a miraculous turnaround victory as a nearly-nameless member of city council.

He never gave up, no matter how impossible the circumstance, and ended up in the mayor's seat. His story moved many people, especially the young—who formed a large majority of his support base.

Perhaps, from a certain perspective, he truly was the island's heavyweight.

Of course, even he was once a young man.

He wanted to become a heavyweight. He once wanted to become someone who could conquer all those who looked down on a dhampyr like him, and move the world as he pleased.

Many humans probably dreamed of such things in their youth. But most probably gave up quickly, realizing their dreams to be folly.

But Watt was different. He had the blood of a vampire flowing in his veins.

He still remembered vividly the excitement of watching his parents transforming into flocks of bats and taking to the midnight skies.

He believed that dreams which were impossible for humans to achieve could all be accomplished with the power of a vampire.

As he matured, the vampiric blood lying dormant within him would slowly begin to emerge.

In his supposedly mediocre boyhood, that was his only hope in life.

He spent his days thinking of himself as 'special'. He looked down on the other children around him and ended up isolated from his peers.

But young Watt did not care. Even those humans who had distanced themselves from him would one day change their minds. They would tremble in fear that day, when he revealed his true identity to them all.

His was far from a normal childhood, but for Watt, who thought himself special, it was an acceptable life in its own right.

'Just wait and see, you fools.'

'Once I harness my vampire powers, I'll make you all my servants.'

He had no friends.

He had no lovers.

Yet he continued to believe in no one but himself.

Rather, he continued to blindly believe in the vampire blood flowing through his veins.

Most dhampyr went their entire lives incapable of wielding vampiric abilities.

Everything changed when he heard this unshakeable truth from his parents.

†

Twisted to the point of despair by the revelation, Watt became determined to use the only vampiric trait he had in him—his very slightly superhuman strength—to climb to the top of the dark side of the island.

Of course, that did not mean he wished to take the throne of the vampires on the island. His 'dark side' referred to the humans' criminal underworld.

But there were no large criminal organizations in Germany, like the gangsters of America or the *yakuza* of Japan. And such things were even more more foreign to the remote island of Growerth. There were no organizations native to the island, either, like the Sicilian mafia.

'Then I'll just make one myself.'

Even after his dreams were shattered, Watt still dreamed of becoming a heavyweight.

Unlike his childhood, spent assured of his future, he now spent his days in the *hopes* of becoming something great.

The fact that he took action for his hopes meant that he was more driven than the average person. However, his actions happened to be taken in the worst direction possible—to become the leader of a criminal organization.

However, his dream collapsed all too easily.

He had begun by sneaking into a ruined church to use it as a hideout. He was beaten to a pulp by the elderly homeless man who lived there.

He wondered for a moment if the man was a vampire, but the man turned out to have been completely human.

"Stay awhile, boy. I was just itching for some conversation."

The old man addressed the defeated Watt.

The delinquents Watt had gathered abandoned him and fled as soon as they saw the old man's strength. Having instantly lost the gang he had assembled over the course of several months, Watt decided to listen to the old man, defeated.

The old man claimed he was once an officer in a gang, back when Germany was still the Weimar Republic. At the time, all gangs were called *ringverein*, and they fought for influence over the cities. But the Nazis came to power and began to crack down on gang activity. Most members of criminal organizations were sent to concentration camps or executed.

"Don't know if we were lucky or not, but our gang resisted the Nazis to the end. We were 'bout the only ones who survived to the end of World War II. 'Course, we were in such a pathetic shape in the end that the gang still broke apart."

The old man spoke as though reciting a line from theater. Watt listened halfheartedly.

Why was a man who took on the Nazi SA sitting in an abandoned church, talking to a delinquent?

But he could not deny the old man's strength.

Watt was clearly physically stronger than humans. But setting aside the veracity of the old man's claims, he seemed to be over seventy years old in looks alone.

How had Watt been so effortlessly been defeated by such a man?

As he acknowledged the old man's strength, Watt began to despise his own weakness.

Was this all his vampiric blood amounted to? Though his physical strength was all he could boast, was it so insignificant that it was beaten so easily by an elderly human?

But Watt had a certain trait.

A trait called 'hating to lose', one that didn't quite count as a talent.

Some might look down on this trait, calling it futile resistance. But in his determination and refusal to surrender, Watt was the picture of optimism.

'If this demented old guy can do so much damage... what if I could learn his techniques? His skills and my power. I'd be invincible.'

Reaching a quick conclusion, Watt ignored the pain in his ribs and spat, agonized.

"Hey... Fucking geezer. Teach me to get that strong."

"Why? And is that any way to ask someone a favor?"

"Why do you think, genius? To mess you up real good." Watt said defiantly, lying spread-eagle on the ground.

The old man's eyes widened. A moment later, he slapped his thigh as his false teeth rattled in his jaws.

"Hah! You're the most honest brat I've ever seen. I like you, kid. But what to do? I've already passed on my skills to another child about your age. The Geissendorfer boy. To be frank, that was the least fun I've had in years. Swore I'd never do it again. It's incredible, what those martial arts instructors do. Just thinking about taking the time to teach people one by one gives me a splitting headache."

The old man rambled endlessly about the difficulties of teaching others fighting skills, but none of it was interesting to Watt. He thought he could perhaps pick up some tips from the old man's tales, but the stories consisted of complaints about life—not a single thing about training or fighting.

As Watt's expectations slowly fell to zero, the old man snickered and called back his attention.

"Now that I think about it, you're quite sturdy for your build. You're part-vampire, aren't you?"

Normal people would not consider this the question of a sane man.

Watt was not a normal person.

Quickly recovering from his shock, Watt stuttered,

"Fucking geezer... who the hell are you...?"

"Haven't you been listening, boy? ...Never mind. Now, if you're part-vampire, you'd best go greet the Lord of Growerth. From the way you're acting, I can tell you've never seen him before."

"Growerth has a lord?"

"That's right. He's the head honcho of all the vampires running around the island. I remember the first time I came to Growerth, sick of the Nazi bastards. I snuck into the castle for a breather, and that's when I ran into him. I thought my heart was going to stop then and there!"

If this powerful man was nearly scared to death, the Lord of Growerth must have been a terrifying creature indeed.

Perhaps he was a monster over three meters tall. Or maybe he had anaconda-sized centipedes wrapped around his body.

Suddenly interested in this mysterious character, Watt shot the old man an inquiring look.

"If you'd like, I'll introduce you to him. Go see him in person."

And several days later,

The young dhampyr had a fateful encounter.

With the one who ruled at Growerth's throne—lord over countless vampires, and the true head of the dark side of the island, the vampire's paradise.

[Ah, so you are the dhampyr of whom Lorenz spoke.]

The world's only liquid vampire—Gerhardt von Waldstein, the Lord of Growerth.

Did the encounter change their lives for the better?

Even now, over twenty years since that day, a clear answer had yet to emerge.

Chapter 2: The Clan member doth devastate!

[Night is near.

That girl was only the beginning.

This island will soon return to its rightful state.]

When this short message reached the press, the police, and City Hall, people laughed it off as a prank from someone who had read about the murder in the newspaper.

But when the second body was found, and another message pointing to the location of the third body was delivered, it was determined that the mysterious letters were from the killer or an accomplice.

No missing persons had been reported since, but the island trembled at the thought of the culprit, who still ran loose among the people.

And it was to worsen that trembling that a certain group remained on the island.

†

Somewhere on the island.

"What're we going to do now, Juna?" Asked the sound recordist.

"Obviously, we're going to keep chasing leads." Replied Juna Riebeluka, the reporter from ZZZ Network. There was no hint of hesitation in her tone.

"We can't let the incident at the square just pass us by. A girl who was turning into a werewolf was taken away by another girl. That's normally the stuff of urban legends, but this time it's different. The sheer quality of information we uncovered is incredible. We also can't ignore the number of witnesses."

Juna was not just a reporter, but the field leader of the ZZZ Network crew. From her relative youth, it was likely that she was backed up by a great deal of talent. In fact, this particular story was not assigned to her—Juna's personal investment in the case was what brought the crew to the island.

"You came to this island for your first story too, eh, Juna?" One of the crew members commented. Juna nodded as she flipped through some documents.

"Yes. Although it's been over five years now. It was for a Halloween special—'Do Werewolves Really Exist?'. Back then, I was just a newbie. And I was angry that they made me cover such an idiotic story."

She looked up, her gaze piercing the evening streets.

"...That's when I was involved in an unusual incident."

The revelation she held back seemed to be unrelated to the case they were pursuing now, but none of the crew members pointed that out.

"Now that I've built up some experience, I can tell. There's something on this island. And this is just a gut feeling, but that mayor knows something."

Though she could not be certain, Juna trusted the instincts she had honed over the years.

With a confident smile, she turned to the cameraman.

"Guard that camera with your life. If there really is something on this island, someone might try to get in the way or steal our footage."

As the crew members exchanged curious glances, Juna declared:

"This might be a dangerous story to cover. But I think there's something worth that risk, hidden in the dark side of the island. And think about it this way... our story could change the very way the world thinks. Doesn't that get you excited?"

†

The skies over Growerth.

Relic had left the throne room to go see Hilda.

But at the moment, he was lingering next to Waldstein Castle.

He was not hesitant about going to see his girlfriend. Relic was just about to dive into the sky over the city, but the moment he turned his body into a flock of bats, his keen sense of hearing picked up something. The sound of wingbeats, discrete from his own.

"...?"

He looked up at the source of the sound. Some of the stars had been blotted out of the sky.

To be more accurate, part of his vision was obscured by patches of black even darker than the night sky.

A flock of bats, little different from himself, was flying very high above him. This second flock was headed straight toward the castle, just passing Relic by.

'I wonder who that is.'

He could tell at a glance that the flock was not a natural one. The wingbeats of the bats were synchronized with military precision, and the flock was flying in a perfectly cubical formation towards the castle.

'What kind of formation is that?'

'I wonder if that's what's popular with the vampires on the mainland.

'But it's definitely not someone from Growerth.'

Thanks to the darkness of night, the sight would go unnoticed to the eyes of the humans on the ground.

There was a gigantic black cube flying through the night sky.

Humans would probably describe it as an UFO, but the cube was, in reality, something much more horrifying.

Not even a vampire like Relic had seen one of his own kind fly in such a formation.

The moment they passed one another by, he got the feeling that the bats overhead had simultaneously shot him a look.

Was it just his imagination? Relic could swear that it was an icy glare of utter condescension.

Relic flew in circles for a moment, wondering about the flock of bats.

It was heading to the castle after all, slowly descending toward the garden.

If the flock really was a visitor, then perhaps it would be rude to leave the castle as its lord, perfunctory though his role was.

And what if the visitor was here with malicious intent, like during the Carnale Festival?

Or if the guest was a friend of his father, who meant only goodwill?

He pondered the possibilities, circled over the city once more, and sighed to himself as he returned to the castle.

†

Waldstein Castle gardens.

Waldstein Castle was the foremost tourist destination on the island of Growerth.

Though it was supposedly still dwarfed by Neuschwanstein Castle, it was still an important historical and cultural artifact as well as a cornerstone of the island's tourism industry.

The castle's great gardens were open to the public during the day. Being in the mountains, it was not a particularly large garden, but there were countless points of interest contained within—like sculptures by Carnald Strassburg, hedges cut into mazes, and a fountain flowing with water from a lake near the mountaintop, with a canal connecting the two.

However, the gardens closed before sunset. There were no people, let alone tourists. And without a lively crowd to populate it, even a tourist destination was no different from a

shady mountain path. With the exception of events like the Carnale Festival and Halloween, Waldstein Castle denied humans entry at night.

And as though in exchange, residents of the Night began to roam the gardens.

Under the veil of darkness here in Waldstein Castle—

The symbol of the hidden side of the island—vampires.

"Say, y'think maybe we need some sort of a charm point?"

Vampires who were currently involved in a discussion very far removed from the monstrous darkness of the Night.

"Where'd that come from?" "You got sunlight in your brain?" "What's this about a charm point?" "What *are* charm points exactly?" "It's those *moe* things Japanese people talk about." "Like Japanese shaman girls." "Or cop ladies." "Little sisters." "Big sisters." "Glasses." "Ninjas." "Mount Fuji." "Geisha." "Wasabi!"

"Say, I've never eaten sushi before. Is it any good?"

"Better ask Mage sometime."

One vampire's question led to countless laid-back answers.

They were freeloading vampires who lived in Waldstein Castle. Originally subordinates of Watt, they came to turn against him after a certain incident. Now they spent their days lazing about in Waldstein Castle and its underground.

Free of anything that might lend them an air of gravity, the first of the freeloaders spoke up again.

"Idiots! I'm being serious here! There's gotta be a reason we've been neither here nor there all this time."

"Oh! You finally noticed?"

"And what's this about a 'we'? You sayin' *we're* neither here nor there, and not just you?"

"You gotta be kidding me."

"Go snort holy water through your nose and spit it out through your eyes." "Swallow a crucifix and pull it back out."

The answers were all rather petty for a group of supposed 'Residents of the Night'. The first of the freeloaders sighed loudly.

"Guys. This is why they never stop calling us freeloaders. Look at Pirie and Mage. They're getting all friendly with the bigwigs here and actually getting places. And look at us. Why're we always in the background?"

"Stop it, man. Now I'm feeling all sad."

"What do Pirie and Mage have that we don't? That's right—a charm point! Pirie's a clown—that's eye-catching enough. And once you talk to her, you find out that she's surprisingly normal for someone who looks like that and get even more attached to her. And Mage doesn't look like anyone special, but he's an ass-kisser, and a good one at that. And he's got that stage magic. Remember how much the guys in this castle hate boredom? That's right. His magic is super effective against 'em."

"Aha. So you're saying we need a charm point of our own."

"Damn that Mage. Shrewder than a fox."

"I bet he's laughing behind our backs even now."

As the vampires complained, the one female vampire among them spoke up.

"Wait. Mr. Mamiya isn't that bad of a person."

'Mage' was the nickname of the vampire whose surname was 'Mamiya'. He was also a former subordinate of Watt, and a new resident of Waldstein Castle, just like the other freeloaders. Even before being turned, Mage was a gifted brown-noser to the strong and a condescending poseur to the weak. He was the opposite of Watt, in a sense. And as the female vampire defended him, her friends all whistled.

"You're being pretty defensive."

"So it's true you have a thing for the guy?"

"I *thought* something was up when I saw you stickin' with him at the fighting tournament."

The vampires began hooting at their friend's love life. The female vampire denied their accusations, baring her fangs.

"N-no way! What are you, twelve?! You should take after Mr. Mamiya more and grow up!"

"In other words, you took off after Mage and climbed the stairway to maturity."

"Just like Cinderella."

"Our times as humans have stopped, which means that midnight will never arrive... In other words, Cinderella can dance with the prince forever. ...That sounded pretty cool, eh?"

"What?"

"Damn that Mage. Shrewder than a fox."

The other freeloaders were probably only teasing Mage.

Though nothing was accomplished, there was peace.

It was just another evening at Waldstein Castle.

But an icy voice filled the garden, denying the warmth in the air.

"I am disappointed."

"Wha...?!" "Who's there?"

The vampires turned their gazes upward at the voice from the sky.

Floating above them was a large flock of bats flying in a perfectly cubical formation. It grew smaller and smaller as it descended into the center of the garden.

Soon, the bats began to merge, one into another, as they slowly took on human form. By the time they were on the ground, they had taken the shape of a girl. Obviously, she was a vampire. If not, she could only be a bat-human or a shapeshifter who had evolved onto a higher level.

As the freeloaders looked around at one another, the girl scrutinized them and approached without a sound.

She was wearing a black dress, but unlike the kind worn by Relic's sister Ferret, it was of a flashy, revealing design. The girl's skin was abnormally pale, a striking contrast to the color of the dress.

The black leather straps around her exposed arms and legs made her look rather difficult to approach.

But the most eye-catching part of her appearance was the fact that her eyes were covered with a blindfold that matched her dress.

"Who's the gothic lolita?"

Though the girl's sense of fashion was unusual, the vampires were used to seeing even more outlandish characters.

"Don't you need more frills to count as a gothic lolita?" "Frills don't make the goth-loli, you know." "What's a gothic lolita?" "It's a Japanese fashion subculture based on Rococo-style aristocracy."

"Wow... Actually, I've always been wondering—how do you guys know so much about Japan?"

"Anyway, who is that? From the costume, she kind of looks like a friend of the clown or something."

"Or maybe she's another Organization officer? Just like how Mr. Iridescent came over a while ago."

"Speaking of, I wonder if Michael's all right." "Mr. Gerhardt and Miss Ferret are there, so I'm sure he's fine." "Are you worrying over Michael now?"

"Are you cheating?" "I'm gonna tell Mage." "You're all so immature..."

As the conversation returned to its twisted rails,

"Might I ask that you stop ignoring me at once?"

Although the girl was not raising her voice, there was clearly a hint of annoyance in her tone.

It was impossible to determine through looks alone the true age of a vampire. But the girl had the appearance of a sixteen-year-old.

Her dark hair cascaded in the wind as she looked upon all with condescension.

"Waldstein Castle, known as the vampire's paradise. I had wondered just what sort of vampires inhabited this place. But to think they would be an uncultured rabble, little different from those lowly humans. I fear I have overestimated this castle's renown. I am truly disappointed."

The freeloaders' eyes turned to dinner plates at the insult as they quickly huddled together.

"Hey. We just disappointed someone we met for the first time."

"How?" "Maybe 'cause you look hideous." "Asshole."

"Maybe she thought this castle'd be full of attractive people like Christopher Lee."

"Or maybe she was expecting *Interview With a Vampire*."

"It's true that a lot of vampires are really good-looking."

"That's because a lot of vampires are creeps who only turn good-looking humans."

"But then again, we've got meatbags like you around."

"You're an idiot, you know that? I'll have you know that I was the biggest heartbreaker in Japan a thousand years ago!"

"Being pudgy was the standard of beauty in ancient Japan only because fat was linked with having food to eat. It's not quite the same as assuming that they found pudgy people attractive."

"That's our professor of Japanology for you."

"Wait, wait, wait. Didn't you just get turned five years ago?"

After a round of whispers, one of the vampires turned to the newcomer.

"Well, uh... sorry to disappoint you, Missy. Try to cheer up."

"...?"

The girl frowned under her blindfold, not knowing why the vampires of the castle were looking at her with pity.

The freeloaders nodded sympathetically.

"Can't believe anyone would overestimate this castle. How're you going to survive in the real world?"

"Be careful, or you might end up getting defrauded."

"You hear about stuff like that all the time, ya know? A human comes up to you, acting all nice, but he turns out to be a Hunter. It's too late to say 'I overestimated you' when you've got a stake through your heart."

"What we're trying to say is... don't give up, ya hear?"

The newcomer ground her teeth.

"Silence, you plebeian commoners! I require no pity from inferior beings like you!" She cried, immediately withdrawing all hints of civility from her tone. The freeloaders shrank back.

"Scary!" "In a different way from Watt." "She's even more overbearing than Ferret." "I think I came a little."

"Sicko." "Sicko." "Sicko." "Sicko."

The freeloaders whispered amongst themselves, but the newcomer's ears did not fail to pick up on their voices.

"Y-you *peasants*... If Master Dimguil had not forbidden me, I would have annihilated you where you stood!"

"Chill out, Missy. You're face is getting all wrinkled."

"And who's Dimguil?" "Sounds kinda familiar." "Why're you wearing a blindfold, anyway?" "Did you get hurt somewhere?"

The girl's rage neared the breaking point. But she managed to rein back her anger.

"Is it not obvious? There are far too many things in the world not fit to be seen by one's eyes. Lowly humans, lowly plebeian vampires, lowly werewolves, lowly cities, lowly countrysides, lowly air, and lowly sunlight. I have sealed away my eyes that they may look upon only the things borne of our Clan's bloodline."

"... " "... " "... " "... " "... "

The freeloaders exchanged dubious glances.

Though the girl was talking like an actress straight out of theater, her honesty was as clear as day. She sounded like a cultist who was convinced she was doing the right thing. The freeloaders felt a different sort of pressure now.

"If she can't see us, it means we've got nothing to do with her being disappointed, right?" "I got called fat for nothing. Thanks a lot."

"Anyway, what do we do?" "What do you mean?" "This girl is really scary."

Though the vampires felt sincerely sorry for the girl, they could not ignore her pride. They quietly began to debate their next course of action.

"Weren't there people like her in the Organization?"

"The Steel Blue Steel Monster. Or Okuichimonji."

"Mr. Melhilm and Mr. Caldimir are kind of like that, too. Wonder if they're on the same level as her."

"Or wait. Maybe she's just cosplaying and getting really into character."

"That's it!" "That sounds about right." "Anyway, now what?" "Let's try and get the story straight."

This time, the conversation was truly quiet enough to pass by the girl's ears unnoticed. A human being could not pick up their voices from even ten centimeters away.

"What is the matter? Have you finally realized your own lowliness? My name is Pamela D. Rosskleim. The eternal maid and servant of Master Dimguil, one of the cornerstones of our exalted Clan. Though I am but a humble attendant, keep in mind that you rabble are of a different class altogether."

The girl proudly rubbed salt in the freeloaders' wounds. They put on stiffened grins.

"Wow. That's amazing. Plain folks like us couldn't even compete."

"Even your clothes radiate class!"

The sarcasm flew over the girl's head as she snorted proudly.

"So now you finally understand. By Sunford tradition, lowly vampires like you would ordinarily be annihilated. But Master Dimguil, in his infinite mercy, will gladly allow your sustained existence so long as you remain quietly out of my sight."

"!"

One of the freeloaders finally reacted.

'Wait. Wait. Sunford?

'That's the bullheaded Clan that's hostile to the Organization!'

At that point, the freeloader realized that nothing about Pamela's attitude was an act, a joke, or a mistake.

It was not difficult to imagine such an extremist being from the Sunford Clan, renowned for their pride.

'So why the hell is someone from one of those Clans on Growerth?

'Wait. That Dimguil guy she just talked about...'

As alarm bells went off in the vampire's head, Pamela continued to pontificate condescendingly. All of a sudden, a cell phone began to vibrate.

"...Excuse me."

She unclipped her cell phone from her belt and turned her back on the freeloaders.

She then slowly pulled back her blindfold and looked down at the screen with her own two eyes.

She was looking at a texting application, upon which she was communicating with someone.

"...She's looking at the thing with her own eyes."

"That's the newest Nebula model, isn't it?"

"Guys. Wait. We've got bigger things to worry about." One of the freeloaders whispered harshly. The others listened carefully.

"Why d'you look so scary?"

"I just remembered something. The Sunford Clan, and that guy named Dimguil. They're—"

The moment he was about to reveal the all-important truth, the scene around them changed once more.

Another swarm of frenetic wingbeats approached the castle. Each beat was quieter than that of a bird's or an insect's, but the sheer number composing the swarm was enough for the vampires to hear it clearly. Unlike Pamela's earlier approach, this one was very familiar.

"..."

Pamela heard the noise as well. She typed out a short message on her cell phone, sent it, and clipped the phone back onto her belt.

The blindfold she had removed instantly turned to fog and reformed over her eyes.

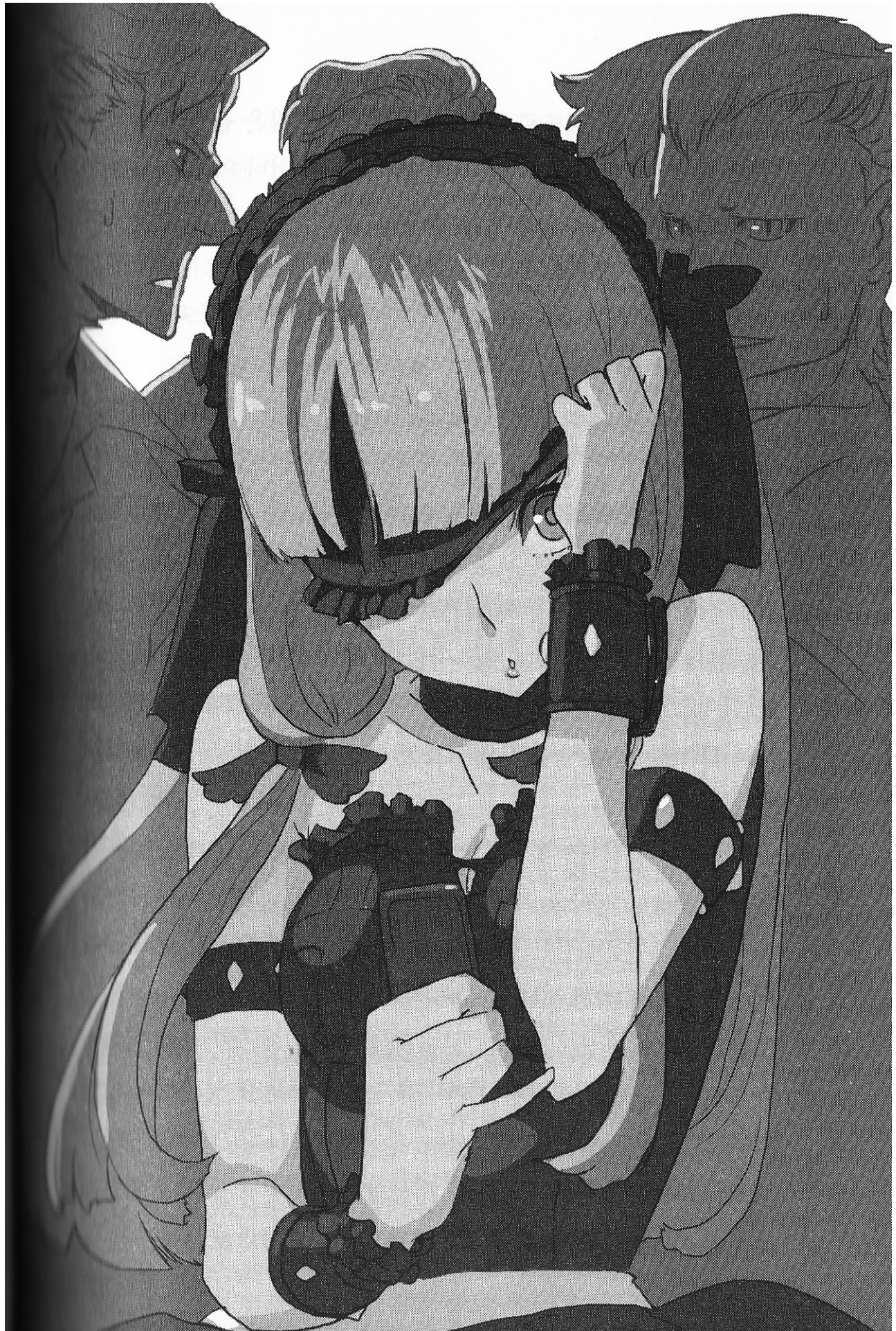
And looking as though nothing was wrong, she coldly looked up at the bats descending from overhead. They slowly landed in the nighttime garden, and took on the form of a certain boy.

Relic von Waldstein, the master of the castle.

Having returned to his original form, Relic first elected to greet the girl standing in the center of the garden.

"We've... never met before, have we? My name is Relic von Waldstein. I'm the new Lord of Waldstein Castle. Do you have some business here?"

It was clear that Relic was not yet used to such greetings. And as though putting a price on him, the blindfolded girl quietly scrutinized his voice and tone.



"Pamela D. Rosskleim. So you are the Lord of Growerth and the head of the Waldstein family?"

"Th-that's right. Although I don't really do much as the lord..." Relic said sheepishly. Pamela took a moment to observe his movements through sound alone. She then tilted her head and sighed loudly.

"Unsurprisingly, I am disappointed."

"Pardon?!"

Relic was flustered by the sudden verdict. "Here we go again..." The freeloaders began to whisper amongst themselves.

"Born as a thoroughbred among vampires, and made to reign over a large group of vampires at a young age... I had wondered just what sort of a prodigy you might be. But to think you would be so... lacking."

"Uh... I'm sorry." Relic apologized without thinking. Pamela's tone grew colder.

"And to think you would so easily submit to the words of a total stranger like myself... Have you no pride as a vampire? There is no security and no barrier around this castle, and you are so unguarded that you have little awareness of your own identity. Hmph! I suppose I must have overestimated your existence. I see now that you are but a mediocre creature, not even worth being cautious for."

Pamela snorted as she condescended upon Relic.

Though such an act was normally cause for anger, Relic was only reminded of the things he heard on an everyday basis from his own sister.

"Honored Brother, you must carry yourself with dignity befitting your noble status!"

"One wrong move, and every resident of Waldstein Castle will be shamed by your behavior, Honored Brother!"

Being already completely accustomed to such criticism, Relic ended up making the same mistake as the freeloaders had just earlier.

"Uh... please don't overestimate me. Maybe you should be more careful when you're judging people. If you don't make an accurate assessment, you might end up making a mistake."

Relic was speaking partly to himself, as his poor sense of judgement had caused trouble in the past.

However, after the conversation she had with the freeloaders, Pamela saw his advice as nothing short of an outright offense.

"...How *dare* you?! I-I see what you are trying to do! You *plotted* with this rabble ahead of time to hand me humiliation!"

Pamela's tone took a turn for the haughty. Relic was left in a state of flustered confusion.

But the freeloaders, whispering amongst themselves, grew confident in Relic's presence as they began to turn their murmurs into audible chatter.

"...So what the heck is a Sunford?"

"Well, I heard they're supposed to be a dangerous Clan. But seeing that girl, I'm not so sure anymore."

"Maybe they're not all they're cracked up to be."

"True. They're small fry compared to the Xiang Clan."

"Wait, Clans? Y'mean those vampires who're still living in the wrong century?"

"That's right. Just like Mr. Melhilm. Wait. Don't tell him I said that."

The conversation began to veer into the territory of insults.

"Wait, everyone. Let's not talk like—"

Just as Relic frowned and made to admonish the freeloaders, Pamela unclipped her cell phone once more.

†

A series of text messages.

Pamela: [Master Dimguil! I humbly request permission to engage in battle. In massacre.]

Dimguil: [This is quite sudden, Pamela.]

Pamela: [I have been shamed by these plebeians, Master. I cannot let this pass unpunished.]

Dimguil: [I know you well enough to guess that your unfortunate habit of unnecessarily agitating your enemies must have been the cause.]

Pamela: [I only spoke the truth, Master! Perhaps I could stand for an offense against me, but if I were forced to back down in silence after the Sunford Clan was insulted, I would have no reason to exist! I shall take my own life, Master. I shall pick out my heart with an ash stake! I shall stuff the eucharist into my throat!]

Dimguil: [Calm yourself, Pamela. I understand. I will give you permission on one condition: Under no circumstances are you to kill your opponents. Is that clear?]

Pamela: [I swear by the blood and honor of the Sunford Clan, and your cursed soul, Master Dimguil, that I shall adhere to your command.]

Dimguil: [Excellent. I will not permit a massacre, but you have permission to engage them in battle. I just happened to need to agitate the vampires on this island.]

Pamela: [Truly, Master?]

Dimguil: [I suppose a flashy entrance might be the best way to begin. Show them the power of Sunford—no. Show them *my* power.]

Pamela: [As you wish, Master!!!]

†

Pamela finished off her text with three exclamation marks—much like a girl of her physical age might—and turned off her cell phone.

Relic opened his mouth to apologize.

"I'm really sorry. I offended you, didn't I? I didn't mean to. I apologize. And if you could excuse my family here as—"

In the midst of his apologies, Relic remembered something he heard just now.

One word he heard in passing bothered him.

'Sunford?'

Though he didn't hear everything, he remembered that word.

Relic realized then that it was a familiar one.

'Hm? Didn't I just hear—'

Relic wondered if this coincidence was really just a twist of fate.

But he had no way of knowing that his situation was not quite left solely to chance.

A message from multiple Clans concerning the mass disappearance in southern Germany had been delivered to the Organization. The maids at Waldstein Castle, who maintained frequent contact with Gerhardt, knew about this.

It was the fact that Gerhardt wrote, [Ah, I suppose it is about time I taught Relic about the Clans] in one of his emails that the maids were compelled to teach Relic about them, shocked that Gerhardt had neglected to discuss such a serious topic.

And there was something that not even the maids or Gerhardt knew at that point in time.

The fact that the Sunford Clan was connected to the disappearance, and the fact that they knew Gerhardt, an officer of the Organization, was away from the castle.

Taking these points into consideration, the Sunford Clan's arrival could by no means be called a coincidence. But not knowing the truth behind the events unfolding before him, Relic was taken off-guard by the surprising coincidence.

Taking advantage of the brief moment of weakness, the blindfolded girl withdrew her anger and instead spat in a voice as cold as ice.

"There is no need for words of apology."

"Pardon?"

"Your crimes will be paid by your own blood."

Just as Relic made to question her, Pamela's body was engulfed by a cacophony of wingbeats and a black aura of heat.

†

City hall. The mayor's office.

"...?"

Watt sensed something off about his office as he returned from the conference room.

The window was left open, and the lights were turned off.

The reason for the change was, however, quickly made clear.

The intruder who had entered through the window spoke to Watt.

"Apologies for entering without permission, Mayor. I've turned out the lights because I'd prefer not to waste electricity."

The mysterious figure sounded quite relaxed about the situation. Watt sighed.

"...Sir, I'm afraid it's our policy to keep the lights turned on at City Hall for the citizens' peace of mind."

"Uh."

The shadowed figure lost all hint of class as he awkwardly tried to excuse himself.

"Well, hm. I knew that. Of course I did. I was just testing you."

As the intruder failed miserably in trying to convince him, Watt switched out his glasses for his usual shades and turned on the lights.

"So what's one of the biggest freaks in the Organization doing in my office? If you can't explain yourself, I'm going to have to ask you to fuck off."

"A freak, you say? That is only an insult assigned to me by those whose observational skills fall short of the mark. ...But in any case, I should report you for insubordination. The fact

that you have a feud with Melhilm doesn't change the fact that your name is on the Organization's roster—"

Watt cut off Dorrikey's mumblings.

"Like I give a shit. First of all, how the hell're you still an officer when you've got close to zero subordinates? And second, if the count is back in the chairman's seat, the Organization is my enemy. So... what the hell are you up to? Is this another one of Melhilm or Caldimir's schemes? Or did the yellow freak I tossed out the building have a chat with you?"

But at that point, the humor left Watt's expression altogether.

'Wait. This guy... he's the self-proclaimed detective.'

Key Dorrikey, the officer nicknamed 'Inviter of Fresh Corpses'.

He was a self-proclaimed Ace Detective who dropped into unsolved cases in Europe by supposed coincidence, and drew the cases to a perfect close by temporarily subjugating those involved or collecting evidence by stalking them in bat-form.

Thanks to his actions, Dorrikey was a celebrity of sorts among those involved with the police. But the fact that he made deductions based on facts only the culprit could know, the fact that his official records were vague at best, and the fact that he made appearances at impossibly many crime scenes led people to suspect that he was the true mastermind behind the crimes.

The arrival of this vampire, who was deeply involved with human society as a detective, led Watt to a certain conclusion.

"Son of a bitch... you're the one behind the murders."

Watt came forward, radiating bloodlust with each and every step. Dorrikey quickly stood and shook his head.

"Absolutely not! Calm down! It's the very opposite, I assure you. I only wish to free the people from fear by solving the mystery behind these grisly killings, which would lead to the bettering of my reputation! To be frank, I'm quite certain I could defeat even the most skilled of killers so long as they were human. Hah hah."

Still uneasy at the detective's show of brutal honesty, Watt got to the point.

"So what's an oh-so-great Ace Detective doing in this little town?"

"You see, I would like to make use of my deductive skills. If you could please use your authority to permit me access to evidence and the crime sceeeeee—"

Watt grabbed Dorrikey by the face and dragged him over to the window.

"Fuck. Off."

"Uaaaargh... Stop! Stop! I think I'd prefer 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue' to 'The Murder in the Mayor's Office'. I'm not particularly well-versed in battle—urk!"

"My citizens are *not* playthings for your little detective game."

"Wait! I have more to tell you! There's still more!"

"Yeah?"

Stopping just before the window, Watt lent an ear to the protesting detective.

"One of my companions was just saying that he was thirsting for blood. Would it be possible to receive some from the local blood bank? After all, it would be a disaster if he failed to hold back his instincts and unleashed his power on the islanders. What do you think? I'd like to hear your opinion."

"Get. The. Fuck. Off. My. Island."

"...Let's set that aside for now, then. Next, it seems that my young partner caused a bit of commotion in the city square earlier today, and I wished to apolooolooooo--"

Watt watched as Dorrikey transformed into a flock of bats mid-fall and fled. He sighed, unable to hide his frustration.

"Brainless fuckwads. Every last one of them."

Soon, he gathered himself once more and gave thought to the new information.

'He said something about a commotion at the square. Was the werewolf one of his friends, then?

'Shit. What the hell are they doing here? Does this mean he's not behind the murders?

'Does the count know about this? And what're the assholes in the castle doing?'

His pile of questions only grew larger and larger, but no amount of thought would answer them. Regretting kicking out the detective before hearing him out, Watt left himself to silence for a moment.

And several seconds later, he clicked his tongue in annoyance and left the office.

Not through the door, but through the wide-open window—in the form of a flock of countless bats.

†

In front of City Hall.

"There's a lot of bats out here tonight."

A member of a TV crew mumbled to himself, looking up at the shadows flitting between the lights of the buildings. He was not from ZZZ Network, but a large American TV station.

Other reporters and crew members were also looking up, having noticed the bats.

The man who seemed to be the leader of the American crew glanced up at the flock and calmly addressed his team.

"I heard that there are small caverns on this island. The bats living there must come out at night to feed on the insects attracted to the building lights. They're really adding a touch of realism to the local vampire legends."

"Come to think of it, there was a lady reporter earlier asking the mayor about something like that."

"There's definitely something strange about Growerth."

"I mean, there's no way vampires exist. But the culprit might be pretending to be one..."

As one of the crew members began theorizing in earnest, the leader firmly cut him off.

"We're not far along enough to speculate. Don't let your biases color the story."

"Sorry."

"Tch. Producer Dugnald is in Germany, just like us. If he happens to drop by, we'll be in a lot of hot water."

"But he's down south, isn't he? We're... probably okay."

The crew shuddered at the thought of the influential producer from their network.

The producer of this particular crew looked up at the night sky and the bats once more, reaffirming their purpose.

"All we have to do is pursue the truth we see through our eyes and the camera. Even if vampires really exist, and even if they were the culprits, we can't let ourselves be distracted.

"...The ZZZ woman, on the other hand... it looked like this story was her distraction."

†

The skies over the city.

'What to do? Watt Stalf was more violent than I gave him credit for.

'If he was involved in a murder mystery, he'd be the first accused, and the second to be murdered.'

Dorrikey mulled over his disastrous encounter as he flew away from City Hall.

'In any case. Just where is Watson, and what is she doing? I should have bought her a cell phone.'

'Then again, neither of us has any official records. Perhaps I should ask Mr. Gardastance a favor one of these days.'

He wondered if he could find Watson from overhead. But it was naturally impossible. Growerth was much larger than Dorrikey ever imagined, and the city was surprisingly packed.

Which led to another worry.

'This is not good. If Mirald loses his mind in a place like this, I'll have more than a small problem on my hands.'

He remembered what his friend was capable in his thirst for blood. The bats composing Dorrikey shuddered.

'I did say that I couldn't receive any help, especially since we're here to observe. But it's looking like I have no choice but to ask Waldstein Castle for assistance...'

"I think I can last until tomorrow morning. I'm sure things'll work out." Mirald had said with a vulgar grin.

'Does that fool realize that he's putting the entire island in jeopardy?!'

†

Waldstein Castle gardens.

At the same time as the bat sightings in the city, an innumerable flock of bats was filling the castle's gardens.

To be more accurate, a cubic cage had been created in a part of the gardens—a cage made of countless bats.

The interior of the giant cube was completely hollow, trapping Relic and the other vampires who lived in Waldstein Castle inside.

The explosion Relic thought he saw several seconds ago was actually Pamela's transformation. She had instantly turned into a flock of bats and dispersed her body into the vicinity.

"Whoa?!"

The wave of bats swept past him.

Relic closed his eyes without thinking. When he opened them again, wondering if Pamela had launched an attack, he and the others were surrounded by a dense black wall made of bats.

The law of conservation of mass mattered little when it came to a vampire's transformation. The ability to turn even inorganic matter like clothing and accessories into organic matter already surpassed all known laws of physics. However, Relic could not yet conclude such a thing with his level of academic knowledge.

"Hey, we're stuck!"

"Calm down, dammit. Right now, we're inside a box made of the bats she created. In other words, we're *inside* her!"

<Silence, you depraved peasant!>

The girl's voice filled the room as though the walls themselves were projecting her words.

At that moment, many bats broke free of the wall and tore into the shoulder of the offending vampire.

"Sorry, ma'am! I've sinned! I'm sorry!"

The freeloader pressed down on his bleeding shoulder, the humor draining from his tone. Though the bats had drawn blood, the freeloader's wound would heal quickly thanks to his regenerative powers.

At least, that was what he and the others thought.

"...H-hey... why ain't this healing?!"

The freeloader grimaced in pain, holding his hand over his wound.

"Are you all right?!"

Relic hurried to his side and examined the wound. It was still bleeding, showing no sign of recovery.

"D-d'you think those bats have silver teeth or something?" One of the freeloaders wondered. The others stiffened.

From ancient times, vampires were said to be weak against silver. But in reality, only about one out of two or three counted silver as a weakness. Not only that, those with the weakness had varying levels of resistance.

Relic and the others fearfully looked on at the wall. Pamela spoke coldly.

<Is that the extent of your foolish theorizing? I suppose I should have expected nothing less from those who joined the Organization, a group created for weaklings to lick one another's wounds.>

The entire wall shook shrilly in laughter. But there was no hint of amusement in her icy voice.

<These fangs were given to me by Master Dimguil. And the punishment for assuming that they were something so lowly as silver... is death.>

Countless bats leapt out of the walls at Pamela's declaration.

"Hey, wait."

"We can't pull fog tricks like Pirie—"

The freeloaders trembled. Living weapons full of hostility shot towards them.

But moments before the fangs could reach them, Relic transformed the dirt around himself.

Pillars of bats rose from the ground, fending off Pamela's assault.

<!>

The walls shook in surprise. The bats froze.

<...>

After a hesitant pause, they flew again—this time crashing over Relic.

"Excuse me! I'll apologize, so please! Let's not use violence!"

Relic cried out in an attempt at peaceful negotiations. He struck down Pamela's attacks with bats he conjured himself. Detecting the strikes coming at him from every direction, he deflected every last one of them.

His own bats were flapping their wings all around him, each looking into a different direction. Relic essentially possessed peripheral vision in this state.

When vampires transformed, they could also transform the clothes on their back and the objects they carried. The range of the synchronization was dependent on how much of one's surroundings a vampire could see as themselves.

In Relic's case, not only was the range of synchronization incredibly wide, the creatures he transformed into were also possessed of unbelievable power.

If he had recently drunk blood, he could probably transform the entire island into a gigantic wolf.

<I see. I'd heard that you were created to possess such powers, but I will admit it's quite a sight to behold. I shall correct myself. You are not as lowly as I assumed you were. And from what I've heard, you haven't yet shown the full extent of your powers.>

"..."

Relic was silent. He had no idea what his opponent was intending.

Pamela's tone, however, only intensified as a note of silent fury ran through her attacks.

<Why did it have to be *you*?>

"Pardon?"

Her polite tone vanished as she showered Relic with outrage.

<Ugh. Disgusting. A lowly *experiment* like you doesn't deserve that power.>

It was a different sort of anger from before. A mix of admiration and hatred, filled to the brim with malice.

"'Experiment', huh. That kind of hurts." Relic sighed, and raised his head. "First off, could you please calm down? There's no point in any more violence. And if you hurt any of us further, I will hold you responsible."

The girl's upper body slid out of the ceiling of the cube.

With her eyes still covered, Pamela shot Relic a furious glare.

"Hah! You think your power affords you the right to remain calm? Or do you really think that you could solve this with words? Your condescension *sickens* me! Our Clan endured grueling sacrifices, spent countless hours, and shed an *ocean* of blood in the quest for power! And to think that a mere *guinea pig* was so easily granted such abilities!"

"..."

Pamela's outrage was turning into a childish tantrum. Relic was silent.

If it was not clear before, the girl was indeed a Clan member. And though Relic had no idea exactly how much Pamela's Clan had suffered, he could not argue against her final statement.

'*It's not like I ever wanted to have this much power.*' Relic could say, but he did not dislike his powers, and he was not so insensitive that he could voice such a thought.

At Relic's silence, the freeloaders decided to console Pamela themselves.

"Missy, I don't know how old you are, but with a pretty face like yours, you don't deserve to complain. Relic here's a born stud and a nobleman with a cute sister, but us being jealous ain't going to change a thing."

"The world's a cruel place. Suffering and sacrifice doesn't necessarily yield results in proportion."

"And you never know. Sometimes you can hope for a no-risk-high-return investment."

"That's why we won't have to seriously consider finding a job." "Ever!"

As the freeloaders called out in earnest, Relic awkwardly stopped them.

"I'm really sorry, everyone. But it only sounds like you're trying to aggravate her."

The freeloaders tilted their heads. The one who had been bitten in the shoulder all-too-calmly looked up at Pamela.

"Look, I'll apologize properly, so could you please tell me how to stop the bleeding?"

"..."

Pamela withdrew her expression and thought for a moment.

But just as she opened her mouth, a completely new voice joined them from outside the cube.

"Ooh~! What's this? What's this? Is this a new game?"

It was an extremely energetic voice.

"Who's doing this? Tee hee! Who is it? Tell me tell me tell me! What's going on?"

Recognizing Pirie's presence, the freeloaders rejoiced. They called to the outside, assured that she could somehow change the situation.

"Oy, Clown!" "Over here!" "Can you hear us?!"

"Hey, it's the NEET Squad! What'cha doin' in there? Is this a new game? Can I turn into fog and get inside and join you?"

She sounded like she was near the wall, unable to make it through.

"Who're you calling NEETs? Anyway, we've got a job for you! Go straight back to the castle and wake up Val! He could take down this wall without breaking a sweat!"

The freeloader was talking about a special vampire who lived under the castle. But Pirie did not quite understand what was happening.

"Huh? What? So what's going on here?"

"Never mind that! We don't know what we're s'pposed to do, either!"

"Okay! I'll bring him over!"

Although she still had many questions, Pirie decided to do as she was told.

Valdred Ivanhoe was an unusual vampire who called the entire island his own body. Because he originally evolved from a plant, at night he generally rested alongside a vampire called Selim. But when he awoke, his consciousness spanned every corner of the island, and could create incredible illusions and wield his powerful telekinetic powers. Though limited to Growerth, Val's powers were a match for Relic's. However, none of that mattered if his consciousness was not present.

Pirie turned with a surprisingly grim look, having noticed that something was wrong.

"I promise I'll be back in three days, so don't let the king execute you in the meantime, okay?"

"Th-three days?!" "We're going to die!" "Hurry up! This queen doesn't look like the patient type!"

Pirie transformed her body into a colorful patch of fog and headed for one of the castle's ventilation shafts.

That was when she heard something. The voice of a girl around her own age.

"...I cannot have you calling for reinforcements."

She no longer possessed the anger she unleashed upon Relic, her voice instead deadly calm.

"Stop! She has nothing to do with this!" Relic cried.

A sense of danger ran through the jester's veins, but she was in fog form. Assured of her safety, she hurried toward the castle.

'Huh?'

She felt something on her body. Followed by a sensation of burning agony.

'That hurts! What is this?!'

Not knowing what happened, she finally turned her attention behind her.

A small flock of bats had detached themselves from the cube, and were circling through the colorful fog—her body—in a perfectly geometric pattern.

The scene was no cause for alarm.

Initially, at least.

But the jester finally realized that the bats were tearing apart the fog that composed her body.

It was as though her transformation was forcibly undone only in the parts bitten by the bats.

Realizing that she had to run, the jester thinned out her body even more and sped up towards the castle. But the flock of bats slowly grew in number and began to eat away at her fog.

'Ow! Ow ow ow ow ow! This hurts even more than Master Watt's chops!'

'But not as much as his eye gouges, so I'll endure it!'

Reassuring herself in a way that would not work on anyone else, the jester pressed on.

But the flock multiplied and began to create a new wall around her.

"She has nothing to do with this! She didn't even insult you!" Relic cried from inside the cube.

"She is one of the vampires who live in this castle, is she not? Is it not natural that I treat her as an enemy, since I am attacking you, her master?"

"...!"

Though Relic wanted to deny that they were master and subordinate, he knew Pamela would neither listen nor be convinced quickly.

He did not know what was happening outside, but the cube around them had gotten smaller. It was obvious that something had happened to Pirie.

What was Pamela doing to her, Relic thought anxiously. He wanted to fly up into the air, but the bats surrounding him allowed him no such freedom. He attempted to create wolf muzzles in the ground to tear at the walls, but the bats avoided them with ease. The cube remained unbroken.

Relic considered turning the ground underfoot into fog to escape. But if he and the others inside disappeared, every bat in the cube would switch targets to Pirie.

Then should he create a maw large enough to swallow the entire cube, Relic wondered. But could he manage such a feat when he hadn't had a proper drink of blood recently?

Countless thoughts filled his mind, but there was no time to lose.

"...We're all going to get swallowed, everyone. Please hold on."

"What? Seriously?!" No way!"

The vampires paled, having been in the past swallowed by the wolf jaws Relic had created. But Relic began to synchronize himself with the ground nonetheless.

But the synchronization was halted.

"Soft as ever. Though I suppose that's one of your charms."

The darkness of the cube was suddenly broken by a cold female voice and countless flashes of silver.

<Eeyaaargh?!>

There was a terrible scream as several bats fell to the ground near Relic and the others.

Each bat had been impaled by silver weapons—silver table knives and forks.

<Another Waldstein servant, are you?!> Pamela shrieked in agony.

The young woman standing before her snickered.

"A Waldstein servant? Looks like this box of yours isn't the only thing that's hollow. I'm just a passing vampire."

The long-haired woman muttered scornfully, a contrast to the well-meaning freeloaders.

"I've been listening to you for a while now. Did you think we were having a Renaissance Fair? Or were you crammed in your casket so long you didn't realize we were in the twenty-first century?"



There was something off-putting about the snickering newcomer, but Pamela reacted with outrage and pushed aside what little worry she had.

<You... you plebeian *commoner*! I shall tear open your impudent mouth!>

At her cry, hundreds of bats flew out of the walls and descended upon the long-haired woman.

But several flashes of silver later, the flock fell helplessly to the ground.

"You're starting to sound just like Melhilm."

In her right hand was a keenly sharpened table knife, its handle covered in wood.

"So, I've got a question for you. D'you really think you could get away with picking a fight with a lower lifeform like me?"

Impaled at the end of her knife was one of the bats that made up Pamela's body. It was squirming in a desperate attempt to free itself.

The woman knocked it out with a flick of her finger.

Losing control over the impaled bat, Pamela felt that part of herself being paralyzed. A hint of unease crept into her voice.

Just what was the woman thinking, knocking out the impaled bat?

This woman with the laughable weapons that looked more like cutlery.

At that point, something occurred to Pamela.

If she had a beating heart, it would have been pulsating at several times its usual speed.

<What... are you doing?>

She had a hunch about the source of her trepidation.

Members of the Sunford Clan knew about the existence of certain creatures. Humans who gained the physical strength of vampires via a certain process.

'No. It can't be.'

Pamela looked upon the piece of her body, impaled on the table knife. A gruesome image flashed by her eyes as her heart sank like a stone.

And the moment the newcomer smiled confidently and licked her lips, Pamela realized that her hunch had indeed been right.

<It can't be! You wretch! Stop this at once, you monster!>

An Eater.

A human who ate the blood and flesh of vampires to steal their power.

The Sunford Clan created Eaters to serve as their slaves.

If this woman was an ordinary Eater, being bitten by one would be like being bitten by a dog—it would anger Pamela, for humans were like animals to her.

But things were different if her opponent was a vampire.

Though she still considered those outside the Clan to be lower creatures, allowing another vampire to eat her flesh was, in human terms, as taboo as cannibalism. The act of drinking a fellow vampire's blood was considered a sacred ritual of mixing blood together, conducted only between fellow Clan members.

To Pamela, who held such beliefs, the devouring of her flesh by a monstrous 'lower vampire' was humiliation incarnate.

<STOOOOOOOOP!>

A soul-shattering scream.

As though the unladylike cry of the box of bats was the greatest seasoning of all, the former Eater followed her instincts.

Several seconds later.

Relic and the others spotted Shizune Kijima in the collapsing wall of bats, muttering, "Thanks for the meal".

And at that moment, an ear-piercing shriek shook the castle.

†

Growerth. City center. Inside a tram headed for the mountains.

Hilda's companion suddenly froze and looked up.

She was silently scrutinizing Waldstein Castle. Hilda whispered to her.

"What's wrong, Watson?"

"...She's crying."

"Who?"

Hilda had not heard a thing, but something must have reached Watson's ears.

Unease flooded Hilda's heart as Watson's gaze remained fixed on the castle.

'I wonder if something's wrong.'

Her heart was pounding, but Hilda did not turn back. She was convinced that, no matter what happened, Relic would find a way to resolve the situation.

Her only worry, perhaps, was that an ordinary human like her might get in his way.

†

Ten minutes later. The gardens.

"I saw the screwed-up flock of bats wailing through the air on my way here. Was that your doing, Shizune?"

Watt landed in the gardens, greeted by a chaotic scene.

The maids came out of the castle to treat the injured vampires. Some of the maids spotted Watt and glared, but they quickly turned to Relic and the others, as though they had no time to waste.

Not only that, werewolves, vampires, skeletons, and witches who normally stayed inside the castle had all emerged into the night. It almost looked like a masquerade—with the exception of their expressions, too anxious to belong at a party.

Watt was left to look around in confusion for some time. But he soon spotted Shizune leaning against the wall and questioned her.

"What am I, your dog? I'm not obligated to give you answers."

"Answer the question, or your scalp is coming off your head." Watt growled, holding back his frustration. Shizune snorted.

"Desperate, aren't you? I just happened to spot a new face flying over the city like she owned the whole damned island. So I followed her and saw the party here. Thought I might as well join the fun." She said with a shrug. "And I was hungry, too."

Watt could feel the anger welling up inside him, but he resisted unleashing it and grabbed Shizune by the collar.

"That son of a bitch over there whining about his shoulder is my former subordinate. He's one of the pawns I plan to take back, and someone had the gall to put a dent in it. So hurry up and give me the details, asshole."

"It's just a tiny scratch. You look like you're about to have an aneurysm over it. Anyway, I think our little intruder decided to hide as soon as she spotted you."

"...What?"

Watt frowned. Shizune snickered and slapped his hands away.

"I guess it'll be even more vexing for you if I spilled it. Let me tell you what happened here, and to who."

Several minutes later, a deafening *crunch* rang through the air.

It was the sound of the mayor of Neuberg punching the Lord of Waldstein Castle with all his might.

†

Somewhere on the island.

"Aha. So that's what happened."

Mirald was walking the streets alone, having separated from Dorrikey.

When his companion left to greet the mayor, Mirald was left to wander the island on his own. Of course, he was not walking aimlessly—he had a purpose. And at some point, he stopped by the roadside and mumbled to himself.

"Things are getting pretty interesting."

He had been reading through the thoughts of every passerby in the crowded streets.

And about two hours into his investigation, he discovered a certain series of images.

"I see. So that's how you did it."

The images showed something that only the culprit could know. The moments of the murders.

At first, Mirald considered that a human who had read the newspaper had thought up an elaborate recreation in their mind. But unless the person had even convinced themselves with the recreation, Mirald could tell if a memory was real or made up.

He read the culprit's mind as they reminisced about the moment of the murderer. Mirald grinned.

"What now? Should I tell Dorrikey, the mayor, or Relic? Or should I not?"

Mirald Mirror.

He was neither good nor evil. He was a vampire who stood at a slight distance from the morality of humans.

He did not care if human strangers were killed, and he had no obligation to save them. "*I'll take care of them if they're my friends,*" he had said, and he stood by the policy when it came to humans. Even if he read someone's mind and discovered a plot for terrorism or murder, he did nothing about it if no one he knew was involved.

If he found potential for entertainment, he would contact Doubs Hewley the Iridescent and get involved personally. But in this case, he was not yet sure if he wanted to tell Doubs.

"Normally, I'd forget about it. But I wonder what Relic would do if he knew the truth behind the serial killings?"

Chewing over thoughts that were, in human terms, beyond impish, Mirald quietly looked on at the culprit.

"And what about me? Should I intervene once the fourth victim is about to be claimed? Heh heh... I'm feeling a little mischievous today."

Though he was snickering, a certain hunger was eating away at his mind and sanity.

The thirst for human blood, a desire only natural for a vampire.

"Ah... I'm really starting to get thirsty."

†

Waldstein Castle gardens.

It was around the point when Mirald learned the truth for no one's sake but his own.

The masters of Growerth's Day and Night were standing in the same place.

To be specific, the master of Growerth's Day was holding the master of Growerth's Night by the collar.

As Relic explained the situation to the maids, Watt suddenly walked up to him. Relic wondered for a moment if he should greet him, when Watt drove a painful uppercut into his jaw.

Relic was tossed aside by the unexpected blow.

Though Watt was only a dhampyr, he was capable of superhuman strength—enough to kill a human being. But as Relic was a vampire, his jaw quickly healed itself.

"Watt Stalf! You wretch!"

The maids responded even before the dazed Relic, rushing to step in between them. But Watt was quicker, going up to Relic and forcibly pulling him to his feet by the collar.

The freeloaders winced at their former superior's actions. Even the injured vampire forgot his pain for a moment and hid behind one of the fences.

Meanwhile, the maids in green surrounded Watt and threateningly raised their voices.

"Watt Stalf! Let go of the Lord of Waldstein Castle this instant!"

"Lord of Waldstein Castle my ass." Watt snorted, tightening his grip. "Count Gerhardt is the *real* lord around here."

"...!"

It was a simple statement. One piercing enough to shake Relic to the core.

"I thought the count just left the castle to you while he was out. And look at the mess you've left it in. What were you *doing*, sitting around while your subordinates got screwed to hell and back? Oh, so you're going to take the moral high ground and respond to an attack with *conversation*? What are you, a fucking *saint*? What are you, fucking *Gandhi*? Someone who actually had a *reason* not to fight back?"

"But we're the ones who provoked her first—"

"As if that wasn't already obvious. My old peons there are idiots. I don't even need to ask if they offended an arrogant Clan member and got what they deserved."

The freeloaders, listening from behind the fence, exchanged glances.

"...I think he's talking about us." "Should we go complain?"

"I don't know how, but Mr. Watt's gotten a lot stronger recently."

"He used to be weaker than us, though."

"Maybe a no-risk-high-return investment paid off for him?" "Lucky him."

"Urgh, my shoulder's killing me. Damn it, *is* this going to kill me?"

Not even listening to the chatter behind the trees, Watt continued to berate Relic.

"Listen up, Princeling. I don't care if you're a coward or a pacifist. And if you think you did something wrong, then go ahead and get the beating of your life. I don't give a fuck."

"..."

"But answer me this. Why'd a passing clown have to get messed up because of *your* mistake?"

"I..."

As Relic struggled for words, a girlish voice echoed from the castle.

"No, Master Watt! That's not it! Relic really did try to stop that girl! He said I didn't have anything to do with her, and told her not to—"

"You stay quiet, Clown! Relic tried to stop her?! Fat lot of good that did!"

"..."

The jester went silent. Watt ignored her presence and returned to berating Relic.

"Sure, the Clan girl's responsible for this mess. It hasn't even hit you yet that you're the Lord of Waldstein Castle, but she went and attacked the Clown anyway for being your subordinate. She was in the wrong. But... if you'd used your powers from the start, you could have stopped her easily. Even if you didn't have a sip of blood, you could have done that much."

Relic could not answer.

He knew Watt was right.

If Relic had leapt in without hesitation—if he had mercilessly unleashed his powers the moment Pirie was targeted, perhaps things would have turned out for the better.

Out of fog form, Pirie's legs were covered in injuries. She could not even walk. If Watt saw with his own two eyes, he might have very well murdered Relic on the spot. Knowing this, Relic had nothing to say.

"You *hesitated*. You tried to play goody-two-shoes and thought, 'do I really need to use my oh-so-great powers in a little fight like this'. Am I right?"

"I..."

"You know what? Your old man—he'd have avoided a fight. But whether things worked out or not, he'd have negotiated with everything he had. He'd have done everything his disgusting body is capable of. Did you? I don't know if they're your underlings or buddies, but could you look me in the eye and say you gave it your all to protect 'em?"

"I..."

"Again with the 'I's. C'mon. Finish your sentence. 'I' what? You think if you can copy the count and act like a pacifist, you'll *become* him? You think being Lord of Waldstein Castle is fucking *child's play*?!"

"Watt Stalf! You're going too far!" One of the maids cut in firmly, but she did not try to stop him. She knew that ending the conversation there would not help Relic.

"You're born lucky. Just looking at you makes me envious. And I know you've got zero intention of lounging around on your throne, but lemme ask you this."

Watt ground his teeth, looking just about ready to punch Relic again.

"Have you ever been *really* angry? Have you ever blown your lid? For yourself or for someone else. In fact, do you even know *how* to get angry?"

"I..."

Relic trailed off with the same word again.

'I... I *what*?'

He did not know himself how to answer.

When was he at his angriest?

The first thing that came to mind was the incident when Michael was badly injured by an Eater from the Organization.

Ferret was left in tears, and his friend was confined to a hospital bed in a nearly unrecognizable state. Relic was furious. But he was not outraged. Michael had put a stop to his anger before things got out of hand.

"...I don't give a shit if you see humans as prey or friends. But lemme ask: Do you even cherish anything?"

"What...?"

Relic looked up, not understanding the question.

"...Tch."

Watt let go of Relic's collar.

"The look on your face says you never even thought about it. Heh. That's surprisingly human of you. ...In fact, I guess it doesn't matter if you're a human or a vampire—either way, you're a coddled brat who hasn't even lived two decades. I guess it's true what they say: great people never raise worthy children."

One of the maids caught Relic as he stumbled and glared at Watt.

"...That goes for you as well, Watt Stalf. Your parents were the pride of the island, to both humans and vampires."

"You know what? You're right. Though they never had the time to waste on me. In other words, me and the little prince here are unworthy birds of a feather. This is a freaking tearjerker."

With a snide grin on his face, Watt landed the final blow.

"You're not a vampire *or* a human. You're just a soft sack of meat. You're just as half-baked as I am. But if you're just as soft as your blob of a father, how the hell're you so different? You don't live up to his name. And I *guarantee* the count would be disappointed if he could see you now."

"..."

"Then again, you reap what you sow. The damned count just has no eye for people."

"...!"

Shizune had not given Watt so much detail. The acuteness of his criticism was only a coincidence, but Relic's heart sank, knowing that it was justified.

"I'm going to take it all one day. This castle, the clown, the magician, the watermelon, the maids, the werewolves, the witches, and those dumbasses behind the fence. Take care of 'em while you still can."

"..."

"...After everything I said, you still don't respond. Is there even a brain in that head of yours?"

With a frustrated sigh, Watt turned.

'I have to say something.'

'But what?'

Relic, still in a dazed state, could not reply.

Watt stood in silence, as though waiting for Relic to speak.

But once it became clear Relic had nothing to say, Watt clicked his tongue and looked over his shoulder.

"You don't know enough about anger. Or maybe you just don't cherish anything at all."

"I...!"

"And now you're repeating yourself. 'I' this, 'I' that. What are you, a fucking parrot? I don't care what secret powers you've got hidden up your sleeve; if you never use 'em, you're just a waste of space."

Finally, Watt declared to Relic and the maids the fact that he was their enemy, and the fact that he intended to take his former subordinates back.

"And if you manage to prove that you really are a waste of space, all I have to do is steal back my playthings."

Having said his piece, Watt departed without waiting for a response.

The jester tried to latch onto him in fog form, but he shooed her away.

"Stop wasting your time and get your injuries checked out, Clown! The Clan bitch get your brain, too?"

The colorful patch of fog retreated into the castle, dejected.

"There is nothing for you to worry about, Master Relic." One of the maids said, as Relic stood blankly. "Hesitation is no crime, and Watt's claims are not necessarily right."

"...Thank you."

"I do not think it is a bad thing to be soft. But I will also say that it is not a good thing to waver."

The maid not only consoled Relic, but she also gave him honest advice.

"Master Gerhardt chose to be soft of his own will. This may sound contradictory, but that was Master Gerhardt's ironclad rule. That does not mean, however, that you are obligated to



do as Watt Stalf says. You do not have to follow precisely in Master Gerhardt's footsteps. Your life is your own. Every choice is yours to make."

"Heh heh. That's a bit tough, I think. What if I said I'd fire everyone?"

"We would respect your command, Master Relic, but it may be a little difficult for you to stop us from going on a strike." The maid said with a smile. Relic chuckled.

But Watt's words still echoed in his mind.

'Do I really cherish people?'

His sister Ferret, his girlfriend Hilda, and his close friend Michael.

The jester, Mage, Val, the freeloaders, Doctor, Professor, the maids who raised him since childhood, the witches, and the werewolves.

'I always thought I cherished them all equally.'

'But when Pirie got hurt, I didn't get angry.'

'Then... I wonder if I wouldn't get angry even if Hilda was injured.'

'Maybe I was just imagining things when I nearly lost my temper at Michael being attacked.'

He had pondered about such things in the past, though he never got anywhere.

Was he part of the world of vampires or humans?

Relic could not even answer that simple question. He remembered his father Gerhardt saying, *[the difference between vampires and humans is a trifling one indeed. It is unfortunate to say, but do humans not also fight wars amongst themselves? The gap between humans and the vampires who drink their blood may be a deep one. But I believe it is one that can be crossed quite easily]*.

But Relic did not yet understand humans or vampires to such depth.

He had traveled the world for several months in the past. But in the end, the journey did not open his eyes.

'I deserved that punch.'

Even as he chastised himself, the face of a certain human surfaced in his thoughts.

Along with the natural desire to confess his worries—

The face of his beloved Hilda, the person he loved most.

As a result, Watt's words began to encroach on his thoughts.

'Do I really love Hilda Dietrich?' Relic wondered to himself.

†

As Relic lost himself in thought, the freeloaders whispered amongst themselves from behind the fence.

"...Is it just me, or is everyone so worried about Pirie that they forgot I got hurt too?"

"Huh? ...Come to think of it, you got hurt, didn't you?"

"That's right! How's your wound?"

"Okay. I'm going to cry now, guys."

"Don't do that." "It's just a flesh wound anyway, right?"

"If the bleeding won't stop, just drink it as it's spilling."

"I bet you wouldn't act so calm if *you* were the one who got hurt."

"Y'know, if you were the only one who got hurt, I bet Mr. Watt wouldn't have hit Relic."

"Princess Pirie's Mr. Watt's favorite."

"And Pirie really loves him, too."

"Still bleeding to death here, folks."

As the freeloaders began to relax once more, a cold voice addressed them from behind.

"I've been thinking this for a while now, but that mayor's got a real soft spot for the jester."

"Eeek!" "Shizune?!" "Whoa!" "I'm not tasty at all! Please don't eat me!"

"Is that any way to greet someone? Even if I killed you, I wouldn't want to eat you half-rotten meatbags." Shizune said with a grimace, sounding quite sincere. The freeloaders' fear was replaced by dejection.

"Let me see that wound."

"Hm? Oh, sure."

The injured freeloader nervously went up to Shizune.

There was a glint of silver as Shizune dug her knife deeper into the wound.

"OW! AAAAAARGH!!" "What?!" "She really *is* going to eat us!"

"Calm down. This knife is made of aluminum."

"Aaagh... wha...? Oh..."

At that moment the freeloaders finally realized that the wound had healed instantly.

"How'd you...?!"

The freeloaders gaped. Shizune explained herself mechanically.

"I ate part of that gothic lolita. Some of my old Eater abilities might be the reason, but I can read the flow of her power. Her ability's not really a technique as much as it's a poison or a curse. That girl subjugated your body as she cut you."

"She *subjugated* me?"

"She used her own subjugation ability to suppress yours—your ability to transform into bats or fog. In other words, she nullifies her opponents' powers."

The freeloaders recalled what had happened earlier.

Relic transformed the dirt underfoot into bats and staved off Pamela's assault.

If he had created those bats out of his own body, Relic would be covered in wounds by now.

"I think I might be able to pull it off myself with a bit of training." Shizune chuckled, her eyes narrowing. The freeloaders, chilled to the bone, tried to change the subject.

"Forget all the technical stuff. You gotta help out the clown over there. C'mon."

"Why should I? I only carved out the curse from your shoulder to confirm my hypothesis. Did you already forget that we're enemies?"

The laughter drained from her eyes as Shizune's gaze grew cold.

The freeloaders stepped back in fear as one.

But one of them cried out and made a very convincing argument.

"H-hold on! We'll pay you!"

"..."

Several seconds later.

"*The clown nearly killed me once, so don't blame me if my hand slips.*" Shizune had said, stalking off towards the colorful patch of fog.

Sending her away, the freeloaders breathed a sigh of relief.

"I can't believe we managed to solve things with money."

"She's unemployed, so I thought she might be strapped for cash."

"She's a freeloader too, eh? At the dojo in the city."

"The place where Traugott teaches kung-fu?"

"Not kung-fu. *Rakue-ryū* something something. Anyway, You know how Traugott's always out of the country, traveling to tournaments and stuff? She just lounges around the dojo when he leaves."

"So, a freeloader." "How the mighty have fallen." "Don't let her hear you say that, or you'll be on her next menu."

"But we're freeloaders, too."

"Traugott's really damn strong, isn't he?" "Yeah. No powers, but he's stronger than us."

"And he tied against Miss Melina at the tournament."

"A true vampire killer."

"Whoa!"

As the conversation began to trail off, one of the freeloaders suddenly cried out.

"You scared me. What's wrong?"

"...'Vampire Killer'... I remember now! It's Dimguil!"

"Dimguil? ...Oh, the person that girl was talking about."

The freeloaders nodded. The first man continued fearfully.

"The Sunford Clan's pretty small as far as numbers are concerned. But from what I hear, this Dimguil guy is a monster."

"A monster?"

What kind of man was he, if even fellow vampires called him a monster? As though reading his friends' minds, the man answered them nervously.

"I don't know what he looks like, but... if he's got the same powers as that Pamela girl, I understand why he got that nickname."

"What nickname?"

"He's a vampire, but his name sounds like something you'd call an Eater. 'The Vampire Killer'."

†

A series of text messages.

Pamela: [Farewell, Master Dimguil.]

Dimguil: [This is quite sudden, Pamela.]

Pamela: [i have been humiliated Master Dimguil i cannot go on... i will never forget your kindness Master Dimguil but i do not have the courage to end it all i am sorry i am sorry i am sorry]

Dimguil: [What happened?]

Pamela: [i have been defiled Master Dimguil a lower lifeform has violated this body given me by you Master Dimguil]

Dimguil: [I am having some trouble understanding you, Pamela. I've got some free time, so I will join you soon.]

Pamela: [how could i ever face you Master Dimguil]

Dimguil: [This is an order.]

Pamela: [but Master Dimguil]

Dimguil: [As your master, I order you to prioritize our meeting above even your own life.]

Pamela: [yes Master Dimguil i shall fly like the wind]

Dimguil: [Very good.]

†

Somewhere on Growerth. On a building rooftop.

"Of course. Of course, of course! So *that's* Dimguil!"

Mirald cackled as he read the mind of the vampire in his sights.

He had transformed himself into fog and hidden inside the fumes escaping a ventilation shaft. The target could not notice him. Mirald had made sure of this fact by reading his mind.

"Interesting. Very interesting. To think this was the truth behind the serial killings! What's taking Dorrikey so long?"

Mirald chattered excitably as he went over the facts in his mind.

"I only came to this island to see Mr. Gerhardt's son. But to think I'd be able to observe a show like this! Now, for whom should I start playing the storyteller?"

Muttering to himself so no one could hear, Mirald lost himself in entertainment.

But then, he heard the voice of a human couple arguing downstairs.

"How could you?! You cheated on me with *three girls?!'*"

"H-how'd you know?!"

"You just said so! In a weird voice!"

"Impossible! I was sure I wasn't speaking out louuuuuud!"

"...Hm."

Mirald lightly slapped himself with both hands.

'By 'weird voice, she means the man's thoughts.'

The voice of one's thoughts were slightly different from one's speaking voice. It was just like one's voice sounding different when played back on tape. But realizing that a human woman with no telepathic powers had heard such a voice, Mirald straightened up.

"It looks like I'm more thirsty than I thought."

†

The harbor office.

As though in sync with Mirald, Dorrikey thought to himself as he sifted through a pile of documents.

'...Wonder if old Mirald will last until morning.'

He had briefly subjugated the harbor official to sneak inside and do some research. But though he was looking into the murders, his thoughts were filled with different worries.

'If that bastard gets thirsty and loses self-control, he turns into a simple loudspeaker.'

It meant that any humans near Mirald would be able to read the minds of other humans in the vicinity.

A chill ran down Dorrikey's spine as he pictured humans getting a peek into the honest thoughts of their brethren.

'Now that I think about it, that was how we first met. When I took the case of an old man who set fire to his house after finding out how his family really felt about him.'

Dorrikey had been investigating an incident where an elderly man claimed he heard his family scheming to kill him for the life insurance payout. That was when he discovered Mirald.

"That's right. It's my fault. I was just sleeping on the roof of that house at the time.

"I was so thirsty for blood that I couldn't control my telepathy.

"When I get thirsty, I end up transmitting the thoughts I read to the people around me."

Dorrikey beat down Mirald and somehow managed to prove that the old man's accusations were correct. Afterwards, he decided that he could not let such a dangerous vampire go loose, and introduced him to the Organization. Caldimir complained that he brought in an unnecessarily dangerous nuisance into their midst—a telepath was likely the worst enemy for a schemer like him.

Nevertheless, Mirald's abilities were such that he was promoted to officer status in the blink of an eye.

'I thought he stopped going loudspeaker after he started hosting those soirées.'

Though Dorrikey did not know how far Mirald's loudspeaker abilities reached when he went out of control, he was certain that he had to be prepared for the worst-case scenario.

'If the loudspeaker effect encompasses the entire island... All I can do is call George the Deep Deep Deep Blue to swallow Mirald and move him somewhere else.'

Picturing the twenty-meter long officer, Dorrikey sighed and continued to sift through the papers.

"Honestly. Computers give me a headache. It's a relief they still have paper documentation here."

Suddenly, the inhuman flitting of his fingers came to a halt.

"This must be..."

He began to flip through the papers at incredible speeds again, and found the page he was searching for in less than a second.

Dorrikey's eyes widened as he put his pipe into his mouth and came to a conclusion for himself alone.

"The mystery remains unsolved, but I have found the culprit!"

It was a rather counter-deductive conclusion.

Interlude 2 - The liquid gentleman doth speak!

Southern Germany. Inside a truck.

[Ah, this quest of rescue reminds me of the day we first encountered the brothers Indigo and Yellow. I still possessed a humanoid body, and Grandmother Job was still quite lovely in form.]

The pool of blood squirming in the back of the truck—Gerhardt von Waldstein—wrote out a series of words in midair.

A man of aristocratic bearing, who sat elegantly on a black coffin, snorted.

“Fondly reminiscing about the past is a sign of old age, Gerhardt. Though our bodies never change, there’s nothing to be done for the aging of the heart.”

[Now, now, old friend. I am merely thrilled at my first large-scale conference in years.]

There were many other vampires in the back of the truck. It had been decided at the conference in the estate of Romy Mars that these vampires would head to a city in southern Germany to protect a certain girl. But because of the range of speeds the individuals were capable of—in fog and bat form—they were put into several trucks to be transported to their destination together.

Some vampires spoke amongst themselves, while others slept. Everyone was doing something different, and the expressions on their faces ranged from trepidation to excitement.

[Now, all that is left for us to do is safely rescue the girl being targeted by the Eaters. If we fail in this mission, tonight’s conference will have been for naught.]

Melhilm sighed.

“You could never pass up an opportunity to help others. What good does saving one human girl do?”

[And you could never stop yourself from discrimination—rather, differentiation. I’ve told you countless times, Melhilm, but there is little difference between humans and vampires. There are parts of either that can be respected, and they can even come to love one another.]

“The result of one such union being that piece of scum.”

[Who might you be referring to?]

Gerhardt’s body sloshed to the side, as though expressing confusion.

Melhilm sighed at Gerhardt’s sincere confusion and answered him.

“Who else? The mayor of your island.”

[There are multiple mayors on the island of Growerth, but judging from your comment about his parentage, I suppose you were referring to Watt Stalf.]

"Who else?"

Melhilm glanced out the tarpaulin covering the bed of the truck, annoyed at the thought of Watt and Shizune. Gerhardt trembled in surprise.

[I fear I must object to your label. A petty villain Watt Stalf may be, but not a 'piece of scum'.]

"What's the difference?"

[Melhilm. It has long been an unfortunate habit of yours to underestimate those who show you enmity. Watt did indeed pull in Miss Kijima Shizune to attack you, even while he was your subordinate. ...Ah, I suppose this alone might earn him the name you called him by, but I ask you to calm yourself for now.]

"Don't forget that you were nearly frozen to death as well."

Gerhardt and Melhilm were the same in that they had nearly lost their lives at Watt's hands.

But their attitudes toward the man were completely different.

[That was due entirely to my own negligence. I don't mean to brag, but the people of Growerth have rather high standards. No trickery of a so-called piece of scum could possibly get him elected to the mayor's seat.] Gerhardt said plainly. Melhilm thought for a moment.

"I was certain he'd used his powers or pulled something underhanded to take that seat."

[He did no such thing... is what I would like to say, but in any case... I will say this: the *large majority* of his political success is due to his honest efforts. Although I personally wish that he would invest more effort into improving our tourism sector, I suppose it is quite laughable for someone like me to intrude in human politics in the first place.]

"There are quite a few vampires in smaller countries who try to control the government from the shadows. Although most fail, of course."

[Ah, it is indeed most laughable. In any case, in the case of the mayoral elections, Watt Stalf was elected with the lawful and honest support of the people.]

Tilting his liquid body, Gerhardt returned the conversation to the topic of Watt.

[He is a petty man indeed, but also an upright one. A *noble* petty villain. No mere petty villain would challenge to a duel a vampire he had met for the first time.]

"A duel?" Melhilm frowned. The viscount nostalgically mused about his past.

[Ah... How many years has it been, now? When we first met, Watt attempted to kill me. He wanted to kill me and take a position of absolute power over the vampires of Growerth. I suppose this is a lawful and honest method of gaining power as well, at least in our world.]

The past. Waldstein Castle.

[Ah, so you are the dhampyr of whom Lorenz spoke.]

That was the beginning.

And the first thing Watt said to the vampire who ruled over Growerth—

"...Real fucking polite of you. Now shaddap and show me your main body, asshole. Or is the almighty Lord of Waldstein Castle a piss-weak brat who likes playing hide-and-seek? Or a retarded fuckwad who's too chicken-shit to show his mug in front of a monster?"

It was not something anyone would have expected out of a young man surrounded by a dozen hostile vampires and werewolves.

[Hah hah hah. You would be the one hundred and thirty-fifth to ask me such a thing upon our first meeting, but never have I met someone who spoke so crudely. But I fear that none of your threats can change the truth—these words you see before you are indeed my main body.]

Watt needed three minutes to understand the fact that the Lord of Waldstein Castle was a liquid creature.

He needed a full seven minutes to accept the fact that this creature was indeed the Lord of Waldstein Castle.

And having acknowledged all this, Watt simply said:

"In other words, once I fuck up your sorry ass, I'll be the head honcho around here."

A line so typical for a petty villain.

†

Present day. In the back of the truck.

[I suppose that is when our feud began. Of course, at that time, one kick from Grandmother Job sent him crashing into a wall. Though it would be only right to respond to his challenge like a man, when I wrote to Grandmother Job asking her to desist, she did not even look in my direction.]

"Ah, Grandmother Job. How is she?"

[Her back is arched with age, but in wolf-form she is as fearsome as she ever was.]

"...If only Watt hadn't survived her kick." Melhilm said, sounding quite serious. Gerhardt responded.

[This is no joking matter, Melhilm. And I do hope that you were not speaking sincerely.]

"...I don't understand. Wasn't Watt trying to kill you?"

[Of course. Every day since then was full of excitement. After all, no humiliating defeat was enough to break his will. As soon as his injuries healed, he barged into my castle again. Although I once told him that I would accept a formal gentlemen's challenge—]

Gerhardt's thoughts returned to the past, recalling what Watt had said.

"A gentlemen's challenge? *Are you fucking around with me?*

"Oh, so you're going to fight fair and square? You're looking your nose down on me.

"I said I'm going to take away everything you have, asshole. So come at me with everything you've got up your fucking sleeve. I'll poison your food, set fire to your castle, and take hostages. I'll pull every goddamn trick in the book, y'hear? But there's one thing you're not getting away with. Looking. Down. On. Me."

[Ah, yes. Truly a fascinating man, though I often wondered just what kind of logic he operated by. Each time he was foiled, he would threaten, 'Kill me now, or you'll regret it later'. And I truly did come very close to regretting it when he set up explosives in the castle. Proof that I, also, was lacking in gentlemanly conduct at the time.]

"So why did you spare him? Setting yourself aside, what if he had hurt one of your subordinates?"

Not knowing that Relic was struggling with the same question back on Growerth at that very moment, Melhilm asked Gerhardt the obvious question.

But unlike his son, Gerhardt could easily give an answer.

[Hah hah. I am a weak man, my friend. I merely told my people, 'I apologize terribly—but if you would be so kind as to play along in spite of the risks. If not, you are under no obligation to follow me'.]

"Have you no pride?"

[My pride is the smiles of the people of Growerth.]

"You've always been good at giving lip service. Don't tell me your subordinates agreed?"

Melhilm's questioning knew no end. But Gerhardt continued to answer him calmly.

[Ninety percent of my subordinates, in fact! The remainder, of course, spat in disgust and left the castle. Of course, I could not argue—after all, their decision was also correct.]

"The percentage that remained is quite staggering. But in any case, I don't recall so much affability from the days when I was there. I suppose you must have changed in many ways since taking that form. And that must have been why Relic's parents fled to you."

[That particular discussion is finished, old friend. Arguing over the same things will get us nowhere, unless we were to approach it from a new perspective.]

"No, I don't intend to dredge up that conversation—back to the point. It was later that Watt came to the Organization, though I suppose you must have wanted to convince him through words alone."

Surprised that Melhilm had returned to the topic, the viscount spread out his body to retort.

[Perhaps that is what the maids at the castle believed. But perhaps I truly enjoyed those days. The young man standing between the two worlds, who would barge into the castle with no intention of surrender. Perhaps I wished to watch that young man mature. I was also quite surprised that he went to the Organization for support, but now that I think on it, he must have intended to use the Organization to rob me of my subordinates, then use my subordinates to usurp the Organization.]

"Hmph. Yet you are still adamant that he is not, in fact, a piece of scum?"

[Indeed I am!]

Melhilm furrowed his brow at the viscount's answer.

"It seems you have a reason that backs up your belief."

[Ah, that is a rather long story.]

After a moment's thought, the viscount decided that there was still time before they arrived at their destination. He slowly disclosed his reasons, wanting to ease the heavy air around them.

[Where to begin, now? Ah, yes. I should start with the death of my friend Lorenz—the man who led me to meet Watt.]

There was a strange expression in Gerhardt's form. Though the viscount had no face, Melhilm had known him long enough to read his moods from the way he wrote.

[A man so formidable as Lorenz... dead. And, unbelievably enough, *murdered*. But what flabbergasted me even more was—

[—the fact that Watt was named as the culprit wanted by the island's police force.]

Chapter 3: The killer doth steal through darkness!

Night. On the outskirts of Neuberg.

"Hold on, Watson. We're almost at the castle." Hilda said. Watson nodded.

They had stepped off the tram, and made it to the foot of the mountain where Waldstein Castle was.

'Once we get to the castle, I'll use the phone at the management office to call home.'

'Mom and Dad told me not to stay out at night because of that serial killer, but they won't be worried if I'm with Relic.'

Although the area was nearly deserted, Hilda was already used to this street—she had no reason to be afraid. If anything, Watson's hunger was her biggest concern. But believing that Watson was still satiated by the meat they bought earlier, Hilda decided to press onward.

"Just a little further. I'm sure Relic might know something about your friends."

"Relic..." Watson repeated, tilting her head. "A vampire?"

"Yes, he's a really strong vampire! And guess what? He's the Lord of Growerth now!" Hilda smiled, though Watson remained unexpressive as ever.

Suddenly, Watson sniffed the air and latched onto Hilda's arm.

"Eek! Th-that tickles, Watson! What's wrong?"

"...I smell. Humans."

Watson looked on curiously. Hilda was at a loss.

"What is it?"

Watson only tilted her head; she did not voice any specific questions.

But Hilda knew that something mystified Watson.

'I guess it really is strange for humans to get along with vampires.'

Even for a werewolf like Watson, a human being acting nonchalant about vampires must be a surreal sight. Though many people on Growerth knew that vampires existed, and Gerhardt was well-known to the islanders, very few people of Hilda's generation believed in them. And the number of young people who actually interacted with vampires was close to zero. The few people her age who knew about vampires never actively tried to involve themselves, and seemed to have no intention of selling the truth to the press. Perhaps it was because they feared something about the world of Night.

Of course, Hilda didn't think any reputable newspaper would believe someone who claimed that there were vampires on the island.

Outside of Growerth, people probably only thought of vampires as myths. It must be natural for vampires and werewolves to remain in hiding.

Though she was never alone, Hilda was lonely.

She was human, and Relic was a vampire.

Counting Michael and Ferret, there were four of them. She was not alone. But at the same time, something made her uneasy.

She was not uneasy about Relic, the vampire.

She was uneasy about herself, the ordinary human being.

Could a human like her really make things work out with Relic? She wanted to look to other human-vampire couples for reference, but there were no such pairs around her. She couldn't even reference Michael and Ferret because the two of them were so close already.

She began to feel as though she were all alone in the world in her position. But Relic would always ease her loneliness.

Yet even with that contradiction filling her thoughts, Hilda could not hold back her feelings for Relic. At the same time, she began to fear more and more that she was being a burden to him.

Naturally, Hilda was the most important person in Relic's life. He was saved many times by her words. But though Relic saw her as a strong person, Hilda did not think of her own actions as anything extraordinary. She still did not know just how well Relic thought of her.

Because her house was far from the school, Hilda had lived the unusual student life of coming home straight after class to study under her parents alongside the Waldstein twins.

Perhaps that was why she had so few friends her own age. Hilda was drawn more to the world of Night than human society.

Perhaps she might not be so conflicted if she were like her brother, who treated humans and vampires exactly the same.

But Hilda knew that she was not such a good person.

Of course, she was not discriminating against vampires.

In fact, as a human being, Hilda was slightly biased against her fellow humans. Part of the blame lay with her parents.

Hilda and Michael's parents were incredibly fearful of vampires. At first, they did not know the secret of the Waldstein twins. They took the tutoring job thinking that the children were merely sensitive to sunlight.

Hilda was also ignorant at first. She treated the siblings like she would any other humans, becoming their childhood friend.

When she and Michael came home from school, Relic and Ferret would come to their house. It felt as though their family grew larger in the evenings, which delighted her. But because they did not get to spend a great deal of time together, at first Hilda did not see Relic as anything more than a childhood friend.

If she had grown closer to him at that point and come to consider him like a brother, she might never have fallen in love with him. In that sense, being childhood friends who only met at night struck an interesting balance to their budding connection.

But things changed one day.

Their parents said that they would teach the Waldstein siblings away from home. Hilda and Michael were to watch the house while they were out.

Hilda noticed something strange about her parents' behavior then. That must have been when they realized through the island's rumors that Relic and Ferret were vampires. Perhaps they did not believe at first, but happened to catch sight of Relic using his abilities.

Not knowing a thing about the circumstances at the time, Hilda could only wonder why she was not allowed to meet Relic and Ferret. When she asked her parents if she could go over to their house during the weekend, her parents sternly told her that they shouldn't trouble the Waldsteins.

Because the ordinary presence of Relic and Ferret had been so suddenly cut off from her, the gap left behind made a deep impression in her life.

†

Several years ago.

"Michael? Why won't they come to our house anymore? ...Do you think maybe they don't like us now? Is that why Ferret's acting so cold to you?" Hilda asked. Michael replied with a smile.

"Nah. It's Ma and Pop who don't like 'em."

"What?!"

"Don't tell, okay? I snuck out at night a few times to go see Ferret."

"Michael!"

Hilda's eyes turned to dinner plates. Michael did not seem fazed in the least.

"Ferret's still flinging me out and slamming the door in my face, but Relic talks her out of it so we can start talking bit by bit. At least, that's the way things've been working out the past few times."

"She's 'flinging you out'?"

Hilda knew Ferret merely as a girl her own age. She did think it strange that Ferret started behaving rather arrogantly around Michael since the twins stopped coming to their house several months ago. But what did Michael mean when he said that Ferret flung him out? Was she taking lessons not only from their parents, but Traugott as well?

As questions overwhelmed Hilda's mind, Michael replied matter-of-factly.

"Hm... I can't really give you a lot of details myself. But if you wanna talk to Relic and Ferret, let's go together tonight."

"...Go? To their house? But we can't go out so late."

'Come to think of it, where did they live again?'

Hilda was struck by the fact that she did not even know the basics about her friends. Were they really so distant? Was that all the Waldstein twins were to her?

Noticing Hilda's unease, Michael chuckled.

"C'mon, Hilda. I never really thought about their house either, since they're the ones who always came to us. But I needed to know Ferret's address to send her a love letter, so I asked Relic."

Hilda already knew that Michael was doggedly pursuing Ferret in a romantic sense. But she resigned herself to watching from a distance, convinced that she had no part in it. However, Hilda did get the impression that, in spite of Ferret's icy attitude, Michael's prospects were not particularly bad.

Thankful for her dependable brother, who seemed to know more about the twins than she did, Hilda followed up with another question.

"So where do they live?"

Michael answered nonchalantly, as though his incredible answer was nothing unusual at all.

"Where else? Waldstein Castle!"

†

Present day, on the slopes of Mt. Wasserspitze.

Just as Hilda's thoughts reached that point, she and Watson arrived at the slopes of the biggest mountain on the island.

During the day, the area was filled with sausage stalls and souvenir stands targeted at tourists. But at this hour, it was quiet and empty—only a few bars were open.

"...The viscount's castle and the streets around here never change."

Looking up at the castle, which was partway up the mountain, Hilda remembered the first time she went to visit it for reasons other than sightseeing. The night she followed her brother there, in the cool evening air lit by dim street lamps.

'That must have been the day I stopped being afraid of the night.'

Hilda tried to lose herself in her memories once more.

"..."

But Watson silently tugged on her sleeve, bringing her back to reality.

"Sorry, Watson. I was just thinking about some things. ...Anyway, there's lots of good werewolves and vampires up in that castle, so don't worry. Or were you feeling hungry?"

Hilda remembered how Watson had wolfed down the chunks of raw meat they bought. But Watson shook her head.

"Five..."

"What?"

Hilda was confused by Watson's answer.

But that was quickly addressed by the figure entering her line of sight.

"Excuse me, miss. Do you have a moment?"

The woman had come from behind Hilda's back, pointing a microphone at her.

"We're from ZZZ Network. Could we ask you for a brief interview?"

"?!"

Hilda finally looked around. Standing there accompanying the bespectacled reporter were four men, likely part of a television crew. One of them was pointing a camera in her direction—Hilda reflexively stood between it and Watson.

"S-sorry. But I'd rather not—"

Assuming that the reporter was here to ask about the serial murders, Hilda took Watson's hand and tried to leave. But the reporter got in her way.

"Um, what are you—"

"Don't worry, this isn't a live broadcast. If you'd like, we'll respect your privacy and edit out your face. That is, if you and your friend here really are human."

"...!"

This was no normal interview, Hilda realized immediately. But Watson obviously sniffed the air and looked at the TV crew.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"We've received reports claiming that the silver-haired girl behind the commotion in the square was taken away by a young lady, taking a tram headed for Waldstein Castle... and here you are."

The reporter, standing off-camera, smirked and landed a decisive blow.

"Just now, you said, 'there's lots of good werewolves and vampires up in that castle', didn't you?"

"I..."

"Would you like a reminder? Should we play back the recording we made?" The woman asked matter-of-factly. Hilda shrank.

"...You actually believed a joke like that?"

She wanted to end the conversation somehow, but the other crew members just watched in silence. If this were a live broadcast, at least, they would not try anything—but this footage being recorded could be edited to suit anyone's needs.

As Hilda hesitated, the reporter continued with a gleam in her eye.

"We came to this island *knowing* that vampires and werewolves aren't mere myths."

"What... are you talking about?"

"I'm certain that there's something on this island. ...Sorry, but could you turn off the camera?"

The reporter gestured to the cameraman, who nodded and turned away.

Hilda glared suspiciously at the reporter, unwilling to let her guard down.

'I won't let these people reveal Relic and the others' secrets... I can't.'

Afraid that she would end up burdening Relic, Hilda was even considering dismissing the woman's claims entirely and calling the police.

"There's nothing to be scared of. I'm on your side. Supposing that vampires and werewolves exist, I just want to let everyone know that they aren't enemies of humanity."

"I have no idea what you're talking about. And how would you know if they're enemies of humanity or not?"

Hilda remained guarded, but asked the questions that came up in her mind.

ZZZ Network was a relatively new television station infamous for its ends-justifies-the-means approach to journalism. Though their methods caused a stir, they also managed to uncover all sorts of incredible stories. Public opinion on ZZZ Network was polarizing, to say the least.

Having heard the rumors herself, Hilda could not allow herself to open up to the woman.

But the woman did not react with frustration—instead, she quietly looked up at the castle on the mountainside.

"You see... I received some help from them once."

"What?"

"A few years ago, I came to this island to cover a story on werewolf myths. That's when I was attacked. But someone saved me—someone I couldn't call human. A humanoid... creature. A creature with a patch of blue fur on his head. I was dazed from being hit, so I thought I might have been seeing things."

"...!"

Hilda was astonished.

A werewolf with blue hair. She remembered him.

Although she didn't know if the man had dyed his hair or if it was natural, there was a blue-haired werewolf who had lived in Waldstein Castle for a very long time. Among the castle's werewolves under Grandmother Job's command, he was essentially the Relic and Ferret's head bodyguard. When Hilda stayed late at the castle, he even took her home by motorcycle.

"Sorry, Missy. This should be Relic's job, but our young master's still a bit dense when it comes to this stuff." He had once teased her. Adding that to his appearance, Hilda had a very clear image of him in her memories.

'Then... is this woman telling the truth?'

Realizing that the woman was, like her, connected to the world of Night, Hilda lowered her guard ever-so-slightly.

But still unable to trust the reporter completely, she cautiously approached the subject.

"Then... what do you want to interview me about?"

"Well, I'd actually like a few words from your friend here."

Throwing a glance at the girl, who was sniffing the air with an inscrutable expression, the reporter turned to Hilda.

"I want to know the castle's secrets."

"..."

"It looks like you were headed to Waldstein Castle. You're going to see someone you know... a vampire, right?"

The woman based her questions off the audio she recorded. Hilda was taken aback, but refused to give an answer.

"...Who knows?"

But that awkward answer was as good as a confirmation.

"Hee hee. You're really being stubborn. You must trust that vampire very much. Is he a man?"

"What?"

"Is he your boyfriend? Is he a prince living in that castle?"

"...?"

Hilda sensed something strange about the snickering reporter.

The way the woman acted and asked questions was somehow different from the way reporters behaved on television. Hilda then realized that the other crew members were also snickering.

'Something's wrong. What is this?

'It's as if this woman knows about Relic.

'And the rest of them... their eyes are looking at me, but it's like they's staring at something far away.'

Certain that something was off, Hilda decided to escape from the crew as fast as she could. Remembering that she had to take the girl next to her as well, she glanced at Watson.

But the werewolf tilted her head expressionlessly.

"What's wrong?" Hilda asked quietly, ignoring the reporter.

Watson sniffed again.

She then mumbled to Hilda, her face still a blank.

"Strange."

"What?"

"The people. They smell strange."

"?"

Perhaps her superior sense of smell detected a small difference in the scents of the crew.

But the crew was from outside the island. There was nothing unusual about them smelling a little different.

Hilda, however, was not so naive as to dismiss a werewolf's sense of smell.

"How are they strange?"

"Umm..."

The reporter asked absolutely no questions of the girls whispering to one another in front of her.

It was as though she was waiting for them to notice something.

Hilda could hear her own heartbeat rise in a crescendo.

Her experiences were warning her of danger.

Her human instincts were setting off alarm bells in her head.

Complying with the quickening of her pulse, blood pumped faster through her body and her muscles tensed, ready to move in an instant.

Hilda desperately held back her fear and waited for Watson.

Soon, the werewolf tilted her head and—

"A bit like Dorrikey and Mirald. But different. There's human smells. Mixed with them."

"...Dorrikey? Mirald?"

The names were unfamiliar to Hilda. She could feel her throat going dry, but she had a vague idea as to what had happened to the crew around her.

'They smell like a mix of humans and something else. And they're acting strangely.'

'What if they're saying things they couldn't possibly know... because someone is making them say it?'

And as though proving Hilda's assumptions correct, Watson mumbled ever-so-plainly.

"Dorrikey. Mirald. I came with them. They're vampires."

The word sent a chill down Hilda's spine. Her entire body reacted at once.

'We have to run.'

As Hilda leapt, Watson's hand in hers, one of the crew members grabbed her by the shoulder.

"Let me go!"

"So you *do* know, don't you? You know about vampires, and the feeble little Lord of Waldstein Castle."

The reporter cackled, her eyes positively glowing.

But the words she spoke could not possibly have come from her. Even her tone had done a 180, clearly signifying that she was being controlled.

The other crew members began to laugh as well.

"No! Let go of me!"

Desperately wresting herself free from the crew member's grip, she glimpsed two small wounds on the man's arm. Anyone else might have written them off as nothing more than a pair of bug bites. But Hilda knew the significance of the marks.

'They're under subjugation!'

Hilda was fully convinced now.

When a vampire drank the blood of a human, they could exert a certain amount of control over the human's actions. The potency of this ability varied greatly between individual vampires—with some not possessing the skill at all—but Hilda's parents had been subjugated in this way in the past, and Hilda herself had been subjugated more recently by an unusual vampire called Zygmunt.

Hilda was on edge because she assumed that the crew was intent on maliciously exposing vampires to the world. But that was perhaps preferable to the current situation.

'Why a TV crew? Is it just them? What if this is just like the Carnale Festival, and everyone on the island is being subjugated? What about Mom and Dad?'

Even as countless questions flashed through her mind, Hilda searched for an escape route.

Meanwhile, Watson seemed to have realized that Hilda was in some sort of trouble. She opened her mouth, intent on protecting 'the nice person who feeds me'.

"...Can I bite them?"

"What?!"

"...Are these bad people?"

Watson's eyes were narrowed and there was no emotion in her voice, but Hilda knew that she was being quite serious.

"They're only being subjugated, and they're not vampires yet... Anyway, Watson, let's just get out of... Ahh?!"

Two of the crew members pounced on Hilda mid-sentence and held her down. The cameraman turned the camera back toward her.

"It might be fun to show the Lord of Growerth footage of his girlfriend getting raped."

The bespectacled reporter was no longer present in her own words. Fear ran through Hilda's veins as she took a deep breath to scream.

But at that moment, a guttural whisper filled the air.

"No. Bad people."

A second later, Watson's body began to change rapidly.

Silver fur covered her entire body and her face transformed into the muzzle of a young wolf.

Her body expanded slightly with muscle, but not enough to tear her baggy clothes.

Watson completed her transformation, human only in her stature.

Hilda gasped, though not out of terror. Her breath was taken away by the beauty of the sight.

Watson, her silver fur fluttering in the wind and dressed in human clothing, looked less like a man-eating carnivore and more like an artistic masterpiece.

And for some reason, though she was under subjugation, the reporter's eyes turned to dinner plates at the sight of the transformed werewolf.

While Hilda lost herself in awe at the sight, Watson leapt with nigh-invisible speed at the men holding Hilda down. She forced them off Hilda and flung them into the distance.

The men fell onto the road on their backs, losing consciousness with pained gasps.

Watson then turned to the reporter and the cameraman, ready to charge.

"No, Watson! You don't have to hit them! Let's just get out of here!" Hilda cried, pointing at the mountain path.

Watson nodded and turned.

But at that moment, a flock of countless bats emerged from the darkness and swept over her.

"Watson!" Hilda yelled. Watson spoke at the same time.

"...Run."

"But Watson—"

"I'm fine."

With an emotionless nod, Watson leapt away from the bats.

Although the bats were making a racket, the sound didn't seem to reach the bars on the street. The deserted road was treated to the unusual scene of a flock of bats chasing after a werewolf.

"Watson..."

Hilda wanted to remain, but convinced that she could do nothing here, she ran for the mountain path leading up to the castle.

If she had a cell phone, she would have called the castle's maintenance office by now. Regretting not buying one when Michael did, Hilda shouted at Watson.

"Hold on, Watson! I'll go get some help!"

Seeing the werewolf nod, Hilda turned and ran with all her strength, refusing to look back—chased by the footsteps of the subjugated reporter and her crew.

She desperately drew up the image of the Lord of Waldstein Castle—the vampire who, despite having no financial or political power, was the most dependable person she could think of.

†

"This is getting exciting."

A figure watched the commotion unfolding below with a clap of the hands.

Mirald stood atop a power line on the mountainside, recounting the situation with a grin on his face.

He was too far to read the thoughts of Hilda and Watson, but he had a good look at Hilda's thoughts before he climbed up to this location.

"That human girl thinks very highly of Relic von Waldstein. Now I know exactly what he looks like—he's a lot older now than he was in the picture Mr. Gerhardt showed me."

Perhaps it was a side-effect of his telepathy—Mirald had a habit of speaking his internal monologues out loud. He snickered gleefully in the deserted woods.

"Instead of a knight in shining armor, we have a vampire lord cloaked in bats. But will he make it in time for a dramatic rescue? I hope it ends up a story worth telling... Where are you, Relic von Waldstein, and what are you thinking?"

"I hope you're at least aware that something is wrong with this island. And that your girlfriend is in danger."

†

Waldstein Castle.

Relic sat on the rooftop and thought to himself.

'I'm glad Pirie's injuries are healed.'

She had screamed and shrieked as Shizune cut her legs to negate the subjugation, but Pirie ultimately made a complete recovery. She thanked Shizune with a pout and flew off on her own.

Though Relic was relieved that his friend was all right, his thoughts were filled with all sorts of worries.

'Maybe Watt was right.'

'Do I really cherish anyone?'

The faces flashing through the teenaged boy's thoughts were those of the countless vampires he knew, the werewolves and witches residing in the castle, and an ordinary pair of human siblings. Of them, the younger sister Hilda's face lingered longest in his mind.

One of the witches who went in and out of the castle had once said to her, *"You know, you have potential. You might make a really good witch"*. But Hilda had declined the offer, saying that she was happy with the current state of her relationship with the castle.

Witches made contracts not with demons or spirits, but with certain vampires and werewolves. Because some witches underwent rituals that couldn't even be described to minors, Relic remembered being relieved that Hilda declined to become one.

'Hilda always stood on the human side of the world.'

'But she still accepted me.'

Michael and his utter lack of prejudice was an exception to the rule. The islanders who knew of vampires generally looked at them from a human perspective. Although the older humans were quite fond of Gerhardt, that was only a result of their age and experience. Most looked at vampires with fear or curiosity.

Others, of course, were like Hilda's parents—openly disdainful.

That was the image of vampirekind prevalent in the world.

Their very existence was deemed an evil, and in many stories they were portrayed as figures of malice who devoured humans. Relic was once bitter that he and fellow vampires were so hated, when their only crime was their existence. But his bitterness never turned to hatred at the world.

It was fortunate for Relic that he was born and raised on the unusual environment of Growerth. Very few vampires in the castle hated the world—in that sense, it was a utopia of sorts. When Relic was younger, he even considered living in the castle forever without having any contact with humans.

But he was fortunate yet again to have met the girl named Hilda.

When his tutors found out that he was a vampire, he desperately tried to hide it. But he could see the terror and disgust in their eyes. And putting their fear into action, Mr. and Mrs. Dietrich began to hold lessons at a different location so Relic and Ferret could not meet Hilda and Michael.

Michael was already head over heels for Ferret, and there was a strange air between the two of them that Relic could not bring himself to intrude in. And as he treated Michael after the latter was hit by Ferret, Relic realized that Michael was a little different from other humans.

'I thought something really selfish—that maybe Michael would be the perfect support for Ferret.'

Although Ferret stubbornly resisted looking at anyone but her brother, it was clear as day that she had been slowly changing since Michael began to pursue her in earnest. And as her older brother and a family member, Relic was truly happy for Ferret as she began to open her heart to the world.

And one night, as he began to think this way—

A girl he thought he would never meet again walked up to Waldstein Castle of her own will.

†

Several years ago. Waldstein Castle.

Relic was taking a nighttime stroll through the air in the form of a flock of bats when he heard a familiar voice.

"Ferret! I love you!"

The voice was followed by the sound of something falling to the ground with a loud noise.

'Heh. Michael really doesn't know when to give up.'

Though astonished, Relic smiled faintly and descended to the castle.

The flock of bats gathered at one point under the moon, transforming into a boy.

It was an ordinary transformation for Relic. But the moment he finished, he heard a gasp from next to the fallen Michael.

'Huh...? ...Ferret?' He thought for a moment, but Relic quickly spotted Ferret a slight distance away, her eyes wide as dinner plates.

'No way...'

His eyes widened in shock.

But there was no particular need for him to look closer; Relic's night vision was good enough to tell that the figure next to Michael was Hilda.

"Ah..."

'...Michael brought her after all.'

Relic knew that this day would come, but this was too early, he thought.

But this was no time for navel-gazing.

Hilda stood rooted to the ground in shock.

Relic was saddened by the look on her face.

This was not the first time he had shown his powers to humans. When an islander who didn't know about vampires first witnessed him, most reacted first with bewilderment, then horror. If not, they assumed they were hallucinating and turned away without a word, or ran off screaming.

Though Relic was used to such reactions now, he could not bear to be treated that way by the girl he saw as his friend.

Deeply saddened, he felt the urge to flee on the spot.

But he was stopped by a single voice.

"Relic."

Her voice was no different from usual—she called his name just like the day they first met at her house. There was a hint of surprise and confusion in her tone, but not even a twinge of fear or hatred.

'But... once she finds out I'm a vampire...'

He did not want to despair.

But Relic found himself frozen, unable to escape.

Cradling a faint glimmer of hope, Relic went up to Hilda.

"...Did Michael tell you about me?"

Hilda shook her head. She met Relic's gaze with a look both curious and amazed.

"I wanted to know why you two stopped coming to our house. That's when Michael said it would be easier to explain if I saw you myself."

"I see."

'That's just like Michael.'

Relic sighed at his friend, who was unconscious on the ground with a happy smile.

He did not want to tell lies or deceive Hilda.

Coming to a resolution, Relic turned to Hilda—the human his own age he had known the longest—and confessed.

"It's exactly what it looks like. I'm not human—I'm a vampire."

"...A vampire? You mean like Count Dracula?"

Relic chuckled bitterly at the mention of the most famous vampire in the world.

"Yeah. Although Dracula's just a piece of fiction. Father says that the Dracula story and the book called 'Carmilla', and the movies based on them, have a lot of influence over vampires today. The books used myths that came from real vampires, though."

Count Dracula was said to have been modeled after a Romanian aristocrat, but many claimed that the aristocrat and the fictional vampire had nothing in common save for their name and place of birth. Of course, Relic's adoptive father once commented, *[There are rumors that a certain family of vampires was quite close to the aristocrat in question. However, there is no way of knowing if the man was a human nicknamed 'The Impaler', if he was not human altogether, or if he was, quite literally, Dracula—'Son of the Dragon']*.

"The man Dracula was based on was actually a war hero. That's why his enemies started spreading vampire rumors about him. They called him a vicious murderer who impaled people to death. That's part of the reason why vampires always end up being the bad guys in movies and books..."

Relic surprised himself at the mention of the phrase 'bad guy'.

'I guess to humans, vampires really are the bad guys.'

Remembering who he was, Relic hung his head.

"...Yeah. I'm the bad guy. I'm a vampire. You saw me transform just now—I'm not human." He said, crestfallen.

But Hilda smiled.

"Thank goodness... You're still the Relic I know."

"...Aren't you surprised?"

"I am! I couldn't believe my eyes when all those bats turned into you! And I don't really understand everything you said about vampires... it was really sudden. I think... if you were a stranger, I might have been scared."

"..."

As Hilda rambled quickly, Relic found himself being confused.

"But I'm glad you're still you. I'm glad you're still the same person I could talk to normally."

At that point, the look on Hilda's face grew uneasy.

'What's wrong?' Relic wondered, his heart sinking.

But Hilda's unease had nothing to do with what Relic feared.

"Hey, Relic? Do you hate us now? Because we're humans?"

"What? No, no! No way!"

He shook his head vehemently. The twelve-year-old girl's face lit up with a smile, filling Relic's heart with light.

"Thank goodness. Then does that mean we can hang out together from now on?"

†

Present day. Waldstein Castle.

'I wonder when it was that I started to really fall for her.'

Relic put on a lonely smile as he reminisced on the rooftop.

'I wonder when Hilda started to like me.'

'I wonder if she still likes someone like me.'

Unable to bring himself to be confident, the boy tinted his smile with a layer of sadness.

But he would not resent Hilda if she no longer loved him. Relic made up his mind that, should she ever fall for someone else, he would bow out without a word. Perhaps humans were better off being joined with fellow humans.

Though Relic knew this in his head, he knew also that, if Hilda were ever to break up with him, he would lose himself to grief.

'I wonder what I'd do then.'

'I wonder if I'd end up sucking her blood... subjugating her... making her look at me... just like a third-rate villain.'

'Or maybe I'd just start wailing like an idiot.'

'Or maybe... maybe I'd get angry, just like Watt said.'

He imagined all sorts of scenarios in his head, but Relic did not arrive at any definitive conclusion.

'Hilda was always my salvation and hope.'

'Even though she's human, she accepted me... from her human standpoint.'

Relic did not have strong feelings on being accepted by or coexisting with humans. He was merely disgruntled with the fact that humans hated vampires like him, even though he himself had done nothing wrong.

But Relic did not have the strength to overcome such things on his own, nor was he villainous enough to rise up and play the part that humans expected out of a monster like him.

If humans and vampires were different—in the way that humans were different from lions and fish—Relic would not have been so conflicted. But because humans and vampires possessed similar bodies and could communicate freely with one another, he could not say that the two groups were entirely different.

But he knew that his fellow vampires drank the blood of humans(though some had no need to), and that humans saw vampires as monsters. Even between humans, wars were fought over different religions and ideologies. There was no way that the many issues surrounding the relationships between humans and vampires could go over smoothly.

And yet Relic could not bear to be hated unconditionally by people he was capable of interacting with. It drove him mad.

He remembered his own grief when Hilda's parents began to sequester him and Ferret from Hilda and Michael out of fear.

That was why Relic was delighted at Hilda and Michael, who crossed that border and treated them no differently from usual. And Hilda, who eventually accepted even his love, became Relic's salvation, his hope for humanity, and his link between humans and vampires.

'That's right. As long as Hilda is here, I'll never despair at humanity.'

Hilda was different from witches and vampire worshippers. She accepted Relic from the perspective of an ordinary human, not enraptured by the world of Night.

'Even if Hilda betrays me one day, the fact that she saved me will never change. ...Although I want to believe she'll never betray me.'

As his thoughts piled up one after another, they began to coagulate into one singular desire.

'I want to see her face, even if it's just once.'

'Ah... I want to see Hilda.'

It was true that, when he received the lecture on Clans, he was reminded of the saddening fact that humans saw vampires as monsters. His unease was worsened by the Clan member's attack earlier.

Though he did nothing to deserve it, his very existence made him an outcast.

Fearing that, perhaps, he should not exist in this world, Relic quietly hung his head.

'But maybe I shouldn't go visit her this late.'

At that moment, a flock of green bats ascended to the rooftop and transformed into a maid.

"There you are, Master Relic."

"Oh, sorry. Were you looking for me?"

The maid was clearly worried. Relic tensed, wondering if perhaps the Clan member had returned for revenge.

But the maid's answer only served to push Relic into the depths of fear.

"Miss Hilda's parents just called the management office, Master."

"What?"

Speak of the devil and he shall appear—although Hilda hadn't come in person this time.

Relic was rattled by the fact that her parents were the ones who called.

"They say that Miss Hilda went out to buy groceries and hasn't returned. They were wondering if she was at the castle."

"It's not every day that *they* call us." Relic said, trying to wave off his trepidation by blaming Hilda's parents. But his body was half-ready to transform into a flock of bats, prepared to search for Hilda at once.

"I'm sure they must be worried, with the serial killer still on the loose."

"...A serial killer?"

"Haven't you heard, Master?" The maid asked, taken aback. Relic felt a chill run down his spine.

"What are you talking about? What's this about a serial killer?"

"We don't know if the killer is a human or a vampire. Some rumors on television say it's the work of a werewolf. But whatever the case, three young women have been killed over the past week—"

The maid never had the chance to finish.

Relic transformed in an instant, becoming a ferocious wave of shadows as he flew down the mountainside in the form of a flock of countless bats.

'Who cares about having hope for humanity?'

Relic ground his teeth, flapping his wings at incredible speeds.

'She's not my link to humanity. I just cherish Hilda. That's all.'

'I'm still completely blind to everything about this island.'

Accepting his own immaturity, Relic regretted his hesitation and continued to think.

That, in spite of it all, Hilda was still his salvation and hope.

And that, even if he had to give up his very life and everything he ever loved, he would save Hilda.

Perhaps she hated humanity.

Hilda Dietrich was, on occasion, gripped by such thoughts.

Vampires were symbols of evil. They were seen as unholy creatures.

But Relic, Ferret, Gerhardt, and the vampires at the castle were completely different.

Hilda sometimes found herself despising humanity for hating vampires for no other reason. It drove her mad.

Normally, a hatred of humanity was reserved for young people in their teens—a sentiment that disappeared naturally with maturity. But things were a little different in Hilda's case.

One reason for her dislike of humans was the fact that her own parents hated Relic and Ferret.

Another reason was her parents' motivation for continuing to tutor the twins in spite of everything. Though Michael and Relic hypothesized that they were too scared of vampires to quit, Hilda knew the truth.

Money. It was a simple enough answer.

The pay they received from Waldstein Castle was unheard of for a simple tutoring job.

Though vampires were horrid, they could not afford to lose the money.

When Hilda happened to overhear her parents saying so, she was stunned. Her family—the people she should love and trust the most—not only despised vampires, they also worked for vampires solely for the purpose of making money. Hilda was disgusted to the core.

And yet she could not bring herself to hate her parents. Because, as the conversation continued, she heard her parents discuss how much they wanted to protect her and Michael. She saw just how much they loved her.

All she had left afterwards was intense guilt toward Relic and Ferret. Hilda herself had done nothing to them, and she never considered herself a representative of humanity. But it was the simple fact that her parents disliked the person she loved, and for the simple reason that he was a vampire. Their unconditional hatred of vampires planted a seed of guilt in Hilda's heart.

It blossomed into her own guilt toward Relic.

Hilda disliked humans.

But she hoped that Relic would not dislike them.

She knew she was being selfish, but there was no changing her attitude now.

Yet in spite of her twisted emotions, Hilda loved Relic. Even in the midst of the chaos of sentiments, she continued to love him.

And so, she kept running.

Ignoring the screaming of her muscles as she scrambled up the mountain path.

She had to save Watson. She had to call for help. But her reasoning began to grow faint with confusion, fatigue, and fear.

'Relic.'

All she could think of now was the face of the one she loved.

When did they start going out? Who was the one to confess first? Such trivial details had already long disappeared from her thoughts.

'I want to see his face, even if it's just once.'

Driven by that sentiment alone, she had sprinted through the dark of night—

But her sentiments were powerless in the face of reality.

"...Let's take her to the van."

Hilda was so easily captured by the subjugated television crew. But instead of going back down to the streets, they dragged her up the mountain.

They did not, however, take the path leading to the castle. They were headed for the parking lot, normally used by tourists who brought their vehicles via ferry.

The castle was closed to visitors now, and the lot was illuminated only by a small street lamp. In a corner sat a van painted with the ZZZ Network logo. It was a rather large vehicle, and to Hilda, it looked for all the world like her casket.

"...! No! Let go of me!"

She tried to break free, but she could not overpower the crew members.

'...Not again.'

In her anguish, Hilda remembered all the times she had become an obstacle to Relic.

She had been subjugated, and she had been taken hostage. Relic rescued her each time. And, instead of chastising her for getting in his way, he smiled in relief.

She, as a human being, fell in love with Relic. But being human, she was powerless. Hilda despised herself and her weakness.

Couldn't she have done something?

Perhaps things might have been different if she had taken self-defense lessons at Traugott's dojo?

Perhaps things might have been different if she had at least received some tips from the witch who complimented her potential?

Or perhaps if she had asked Relic to turn her, even if she had to force him—

Hilda ended her train of thought there in horror.

'No. That's something for Relic to decide.'

Though her body was struggling, her heart was eerily calm.

Perhaps it was because she was despairing, not at humanity, but at herself.

'In the end, was it just that I despised humans?'

She was pushed into the back of the van, her arms and legs bound with cables.

'Maybe... maybe I was attracted to Relic just because I wanted to spite my parents.'

Her consciousness grew faint as someone tightened their grip on her neck.

There was no murder in the subjugated crew's eyes—their only intention was to knock her unconscious. But from Hilda's perspective, she saw nothing but death in her immediate future.

She did not want to die. That one desire began to fill her thoughts.

And yet a corner of her heart remained resolute.

'But I don't care. I love Relic, no matter what.'

The moment she reaffirmed her determination, her vision grew dim.

Looking up at the hazy scene before her, Hilda thought to herself,

'The stars are so pretty tonight.'

Before she died, she wanted to look up at a sky like this alongside Relic.

And just as even the pain began to grow distant, a question presented itself—

'The... stars?'

The moment she remembered that she was inside a van, the pressure on her neck disappeared and blood began flowing into her brain. With the sensation of blood pumping through her veins once more, her consciousness rapidly returned.

And right before her eyes—

The roof of the van turned into a flock of bats, scattering into the night.

It was not only the van. The bodies of the crew turned to fog—the clothes on their backs and all—and disappeared. Even the cables around Hilda's arms and legs turned to bats and flew off.

Before she knew it, the entire van had turned into a flock of bats. Hilda felt herself descend softly to the ground, then found herself sitting on the pavement.

The bats circled overhead like a tornado, then touched down in the parking lot at a slight distance.

The pillar of shadows contracted as it hit the ground, and reformed into a van as though nothing had happened. At the same time, the crew members, including the female reporter, returned to human form, leaning against the car.

But that mattered nothing to Hilda.

Her eyes were locked on the vampire she thought of to the end—Relic von Waldstein.

"Are you all right, Hilda? I'm so sorry—I should've noticed earlier."

As Relic mumbled apologetically, droplets of tears fell from Hilda's eyes.

"Relic...!"

She leapt into his arms and buried her face in his chest, apologizing endlessly.

"I'm sorry. Thank you. I'm so sorry, Relic. I'm sorry. I—"

"Wh-why are you apologizing, Hilda?!" Relic asked, bewildered. But Hilda would not stop.

"I... I got in your way again. I'm so sorry..."

Understanding everything with that simple sentence, Relic smiled and brushed her cheek with his hand, wiping away her tears.

"C'mon, don't be stupid. You're never in my way."

"But..."

"How could you possibly be an obstacle, Hilda? You've always been my *goal*."

At that point, Relic came to a realization.

'Oh, I get it.

'Hilda really is my hope.

'Because she's with me, I won't despair at humanity... or the world.'

At the same time, he became certain that he could answer the mayor's question.

'I do cherish someone. And that someone... is Hilda.'



As long as Hilda was there, perhaps he would never truly know anger. As long as she was with him, no amount of agony and no number of injured friends would rob him of his hope.

'Now that I think about it, this is really selfish of me. If Pirie or the freeloaders heard, they'd start complaining at me. And Watt might punch me again.'

But at least, at this very moment—as he held Hilda in his arms—he did not mind one bit.

He would turn the world against him if it meant making Hilda his. Enraptured by an uncharacteristic mix of love and desire, Relic found himself putting his mouth to her throat.

At that moment, Hilda gasped and whispered, wiping her tears.

"That's right... Watson's still—"

"Watson?"

"She's the werewolf who rescued me! She's being attacked by a vampire on the street with the bars by the mountain... That vampire's the one who subjugated those people! Watson was trying to help me get away, and—"

Hilda sounded a little confused from the shock, but Relic understood the gist of her explanation and looked around.

"Where are we...? What did we just—"

"Huh? What are we doing here?"

The four crew members came to, looking rather baffled.

Relic must have done the same thing as before, when he undid Zygmunt's subjugation over the islanders. Seeing that Relic had harmed no one, Hilda breathed a sigh of relief. Relic then gave her his instructions.

"I'll go save Watson, so you go to the castle with these people. Everyone's on their way here right now."

"I'll—"

'I'll go too', Hilda wanted to say, but remembering how she was powerless to help, she stopped herself.

"Don't worry. I'll be back soon. I won't lose."

With a reassuring grin, he transformed into a flock of bats and took to the skies.

"What?!" "B-bats!" "It's a vampire!"

The television crew screeched behind him, but Relic did not care. They had no camera with them, so he did not have to worry about being captured on tape. The crew members would convince themselves that they were hallucinating. At this point, Relic was more concerned about the werewolf who had saved Hilda.

'Wait. Maybe they'll end up bombarding Hilda with questions... I guess I'll have to apologize to her later.'

He turned his attention to her. Seeing Hilda's face looking up at him, Relic was filled with a sense of peace.

Or perhaps he was relishing the sensation of being alive.

'That's right. The next time I see Watt, I'll tell him with my head held high.'

'What I cherish most is one human being...'

'...And everything about this world she lives in.'

†

Looking into Relic's thoughts from the shadows of the woods, Mirald snickered.

"Ah, romance. I should have expected nothing less from Mr. Gerhardt's son."

Chuckling in utter glee, the storyteller continued to ramble to himself.

"If he really cherishes her that much, I think he should just turn her and lock her up in a safe somewhere. I wonder if that's just a matter of personal taste. Anyway, he really is too human of a vampire."

"And... I think he might be placing a little too much trust in humanity."

†

The mayor's office.

Touching down on the roof of City Hall, the mayor took human form and immediately headed for his office.

Anxiously opening the door, he found himself facing the same vampire as before, this time under bright electric lights.

"Ah, Mayor! I've been waiting for you. I even made sure to turn on the lights so your citizens woaaaaaaah!"

"I. Told. You. To. Fuck. Off."

This time, Watt's voice was tinged with not only unease, but bloodlust. He grabbed the detective by the neck and prepared to fling him out the window again.

But this time, Dorrikey resisted. He transformed his upper body into a flock of bats and escaped Watt's grip.

"Asshole..." Watt growled, ready to unleash his full power. But Dorrikey's cry froze his thoughts.

"Wait! Do you *want* to allow a fourth victim to be claimed?!"

"...What?"

"I don't yet know the exact identity of the culprit, but I've narrowed down the list of suspects! The police force may be powerless this time, Mayor. There is a Clan involved in this case!"

†

Ten minutes later, somewhere on the island.

<...So you finally present yourself.>

The voice began to echo as soon as Relic discovered the cube of bats.

In their battle, Watson and the vampire must have gotten further from the place Hilda described. It took Relic some time to locate them.

They were in the woods on the mountainside, far from any human residence.

From inside the cube, identical to the one he saw in the gardens, Relic could hear the sound of something being torn again and again.

<This lowly beast has been giving me a bit of trouble, I'm afraid.>

No sooner had she spoken did Pamela undo her transformation, the cube of bats disappearing in a flash.

From the box emerged a werewolf whose arms and legs were covered in cuts. The wolf was looking straight at Relic, eyes wide open.

"Oh, uh... you're Watson, right? Hilda asked me to come help you."

From the transformation, Relic supposed that the werewolf was still young—younger than himself. But it was difficult to discern the werewolf's gender from their clothing, and Relic did not know enough about the race to determine sex from the face of a transformed werewolf.

Meanwhile, the werewolf reacted to the name 'Hilda'. She turned herself back into human form and nodded blankly.

Hearing the conversation through the flow of the air, the blindfolded Pamela giggled.

"So, what brings the opportunistic Lord of Waldstein Castle to this humble maiden?"

"Well... a few things. I'd like you to apologize to the people you hurt earlier, but before that, I'd like you to apologize for dragging Hilda into this mess."

"Hilda? Oh, that human girl. So you are connected to her after all. I thought she might become a useful bargaining chip, but I suppose I've failed."

Pamela spoke as though she never expected any results from her plan to being with.

"Just how exactly is this human girl related to you? Is she your pet? Or a talented servant? Or perhaps one of your toys? At one point, it was quite fashionable among the members of the Sunford Clan to feign affection for a human, only to betray them at the moment of truth and throw them into despair."

Relic refused to be provoked by Pamela's unpleasant comment. He only calmly conveyed his own intentions.

"I'm sorry in advance, Miss Pamela. Let me warn you beforehand."

"?"

As the girl tilted her head, wondering why he was apologizing, Relic quietly glared.

Transforming the large trees around him into gigantic wolves, he continued firmly.

"This time... I'll get serious from the very start."

†

Relic's full powers were indeed enough to terrify Pamela.

Multiple perfectly ordinary trees in the forest turned into five-meter-tall wolves, which went on to lunge at her simultaneously.

That alone she could evade by turning into a flock of bats. But Relic's attacks did not end there.

One wolf buried its muzzle into the ground, and threw back its head toward Pamela.

Chunks of dirt fell like rain upon her. But that alone did her no harm.

As Pamela wondered if Relic was playing a trick, the pieces of dirt transformed into bats one after another and crashed over her from every direction.

"Urgh..."

Though she was capable of turning to bats, Pamela was not so skilled at becoming fog. And being completely incapable of turning into a wolf, Relic's attacks damaged her pride more than her body.

'What disgusting omnipotence!'

A being she looked down upon was flaunting his overpowering talent before her very eyes.

Refusing to give up, Pamela stubbornly attempted a sneak attack on the flock of bats from near the ground. But she was countered by yet more bats that rose up from the ground itself.

She had no time to create a box of bats, and no time to think of a strategy.

Even diverting Relic's attention by attacking the silver werewolf would be pointless. The werewolf was capable of defending herself, as Pamela discovered to her humiliation in the difficult battle she fought earlier.

Meanwhile, Relic found himself asking questions as well. But this time, he had no reservations about battle.

'I wonder why this vampire went after Hilda.'

'Before that, why did she even come to Growerth in the first place?'

Pamela was defending herself with everything she had. But she showed no sign of wanting to escape. Although she had fled from the battle with Shizune, under normal circumstances, Pamela probably could not allow herself to retreat.

'But it's not like I can try to copy Shizune, either.'

Cannibalism was as much of a taboo among vampires as it was among humans. Because he knew just how terrifying the actions of Eaters like Shizune and Rudi were, Relic could never resort to the method himself.

'Can vampires drink other vampires' blood to subjugate them?'

Even as he thought, his attacks did not slow.

Waiting for his opponent to grow fatigued, he would use a gigantic wolf's maw to swallow her.

But just as a concrete plan formed in his head—

A ringtone began to sound from Pamela's waist.

Noting the sound, which cut off less than two seconds after it began, Pamela ground her teeth with a glare. She stopped attacking completely and turned solely to defense.

"?"

"I'm afraid I will have to let you off easy today."

Relic tilted his head, confused by the girl's haughty attitude. But before he could say a word, Pamela reached up to her blindfold.

"I shall acknowledge that you are not merely plebeian beings—you are enemies whom we must destroy, using all the power at our disposal. As proof, I shall allow your form to be engraved into my eyes."

Then, the girl gently pulled down her blindfold and looked at Relic and Watson—

"..."

—and froze.

"?"

Relic tilted his head again. It occurred to him that the girl might have some sort of power connected to her eyes. He cautiously began to increase his range of synchronization to the ground under the girl's feet.

The moment she made one false move, he would create a maw in the ground and drag her under. But instead of taking action, Pamela covered her eyes once more and spoke plainly.

"Do you love that human girl?"

"Huh?! Uh, I... yes."

Relic was caught off-guard by the question. It was an unnerving change of tone, especially after all Pamela's talk of servants and toys.

"...I see. So you destroyed the human puppets and rescued her from their hands." Pamela said blankly. Relic gave a wry chuckle and shook his head.

"Not at all. I just freed them from your subjugation. They must have escaped into the castle together by now."

Pamela opened her mouth in surprise. Then, she chuckled bitterly.

"...So you are even capable of negating subjugation. I am surprised."

Then, every expression disappeared from her face as her voice filled, not with disdain, but sympathy.

"Poor thing."

"What?"

Relic had no idea what she meant.

Pamela slowly walked over toward Relic and Watson.

"Relic von Waldstein. I believed that you were merely a vampire who was polluted by humans and brainwashed into living by their ideology. But I was mistaken."

If they were human, her breathing would have reached him at this point. Pamela stopped.

"You place too much trust in humanity."

At that point, a powerful gust of wind rose from under Pamela, and a twisting flock of bats rose up into the air.

Relic hurriedly created a wolf's jaws in the ground underneath, but they could not capture the rapidly scattering flock.

And in the midst of her countless wingbeats, Pamela whispered to Relic once more.

"...More than even the humans do."

A single sentence, planting a seed of apprehension in his heart.

†

Several minutes later.

When Relic returned to the parking lot, he was met by Pirie and the others.

"Hey, where's Hilda?"

As his heart beat furiously in his chest, Relic turned to the freeloaders.

The van that had been parked there was nowhere in sight, and the television crew and Hilda were gone.

"We haven't seen her anywhere. We saw you coming this way from the sky, so we just came here ourselves."

"Maybe we just missed one another."

"But there's only one path down the mountain."

Something in Relic sank.

It felt as though something other than his heart had sent ripples through his entire body.

As though his every cell were trembling in fear.

'Right. The TV crew must have taken her somewhere safe.'

'Hilda must have told them to go to the castle, but they must have stopped her.'

His heart refused to lose hope. But Relic realized that his fingertips were trembling.

'I have to find her.'

Suddenly, someone tugged on his sleeve.

"Huh?"

There stood the werewolf girl who had followed him as he flew in bat-form. She pointed blankly at the place the van was parked.

"Hilda's scent. Ended there."

Revealing that Hilda got on the van, Watson sniffed the air and continued expressionlessly.

"There aren't many cars. Right now. I can follow the scent. From the car that was there."

†

Less than twenty minutes ago. The parking lot.

"You saw it too, didn't you? That boy just turned into a flock of bats!"

The reporter approached Hilda excitably. Hilda awkwardly looked away.

Things were no different from when they were still under subjugation.

'Oh, Relic.'

Though inwardly she complained, Hilda was overjoyed that she was at least able to think such thoughts.

She had no idea what was happening on the island now.

But now that Relic had saved her, she could rest easy.

That peace of mind was what allowed her to complain in the first place.

Looking around at the five confused crew members, Hilda sighed in relief.

'Anyway, it's a good thing they didn't catch Relic on ca-'

At that point, her thoughts came grinding to a halt.

She was struck by an intense sense of incongruity.

'The camera...'

She recalled how the crew members had regained consciousness after Relic freed them from subjugation.

'Back then... I didn't see a camera...'

Then, she remembered something even more obvious.

Currently, she was surrounded by five crew members from ZZZ Network.

But weren't there only four of them around when Relic took off?

'It can't be!

'The cameraman... he might still be under subjugation!'

Instantly jolted into a guarded state, Hilda turned to the cameraman.

Perhaps she should explain the situation to the other crew members and have them restrain the man. But how would she explain things to them?

As she furiously brainstormed for ideas, she looked at the man pointing the camera at her face.

"Something wrong with my camera?"

The man tilted his head in confusion. It occurred to Hilda that perhaps she was just being paranoid.

But—

A second later, there was a pained gasp as the sound recordist fell to the ground.

He was followed by the other members, whose knees buckled as they collapsed in a heap.

"Wha..."

As she turned, wondering what was happening, she felt something piercing her body.

What overpowered the pain was the surprise.

Some sort of fluid was being injected into her.

The moment she realized that the object in her neck was not a vampire's fangs, but a medical syringe, Hilda realized that she was never out of danger to begin with.

Her consciousness grew dim even faster than when she was being choked.

'Relic...'

Once more, her thoughts called out to the one she loved.

But this time, no one came for her.

Hilda once thought—when she breathed her last, she wanted to die looking at Relic's face.

But fate did not permit such a convenient end.

Before her eyes were two faces.

One was her own, reflected in the lens of the camera.

The other was the deranged grin of the serial killer reflected behind her.

That was the last thing the human girl named Hilda ever saw.

†

Present time, the mayor's office.

"Will this be enough to convince you?"

"..."

Watt sighed as he read through the documents Dorrikey produced.

As Watt remained silent, Dorrikey fiddled with his pipe and continued.

"There is a Clan member involved with this case, no doubt. But that vampire... is merely an accomplice. The one who assisted in hiding the bodies. Of course, that does not mean that the culprit ever noticed the presence of the accomplice."

"That actually sounds plausible, if your documents are legit."

"The police will arrive at the same conclusion eventually, but because of the vampire's involvement, it will take them some time. The killer may very well be carrying out another murder as we speak."

"Shit. You don't have to tell me twice."

Ignoring Watt, Dorrikey continued plainly.

"Whatever you may say to me, I shall do my duty as a detective and do everything in my power to prevent another murder. The reason I came here to speak to the vampire who rules over the humans of this island—you—is because we are members of the Organization."

With that, Dorrikey headed for the window with the pipe in his mouth.

"Wait."

Watt said to his back.

"I'll take the north side of the island. You take the south. I'll get this intel to the crowd at the castle along the way."

"I'm surprised. I was told that you are on rather unfriendly terms with Waldstein Castle. Of course, I will not complain about additional help." Dorrikey said, furrowing his brow. Watt grinned.

"As if I'd go up to them to get all buddy-buddy at this point. I'm only *using* them for the sake of *my* city."

†

Twenty minutes later. An abandoned church in western Growerth.

Watson had followed the scent of the van to a small, ruined church on the west side of the island.

The van was parked in the woods a short distance away. According to Watson, Hilda's scent had traveled into the church.

The building had been abandoned after a fire gutted the interior and a new chapel was built on the south side of the island.

The stone building was humble and nearly buried by the foliage, but there was a foreboding air about it that weighed even on Relic, who was not weak against crucifixes.

Of course, the church was not the main reason for his unease.

An indescribable sense of fear was twisting through his veins.

The nameless regret that he had done something irreversible, pressing on his gut.

And dealing the critical blow to his thoughts, bursting with apprehension, was—

"...I smell blood."

Watson's words before the church.

Before he knew it, Relic was running.

He grabbed the handle of the metal door and pulled it open with all his might.

The interior was charred, ravaged by fire. The black of the brick walls, and the white of the moonlight.

And at the forefront of it all—

A flash of pale skin, leaning against the half-burned altar.

Spreading all the way to the floor underneath, a dark and vibrant—

Red.

Relic could not comprehend the scene.

'Why is Hilda sleeping in a place like this?'

'What if she catches a cold?'

Relic's mind tried to deny the truth, desperately trying to avoid a complete mental breakdown. But the overpowering splash of red at the very center of his sights would not allow it.

"Hil... da...?"

He approached her slowly. He gently pulled her up by the shoulders.

Her head and arms drooped limply, like a marionette with its strings cut.

"Wake up, Hilda. This isn't funny."

He knew at a glance that she was not asleep.

Such a prank was impossible for humans, said the gaping hole in her chest.

A human could not survive without a heart.

Even Relic knew that much.

But he could not believe that simple fact.

"..."

Dozens of seconds passed in silence.

The calm was an icy one, heavy and cold as it threatened to freeze the very air around him.

Soon, Watson stepped through the doors and entered the chapel—

And Relic destroyed the silence he himself had created.

Taking Hilda's body in a crushing embrace, he sunk his fangs deep into her pale neck.

He sucked her blood without a hint of restraint, following his instincts to try and turn her into a vampire. But Hilda's body did not so much as twitch. All he tasted was cold, rusted iron, empty of human life.

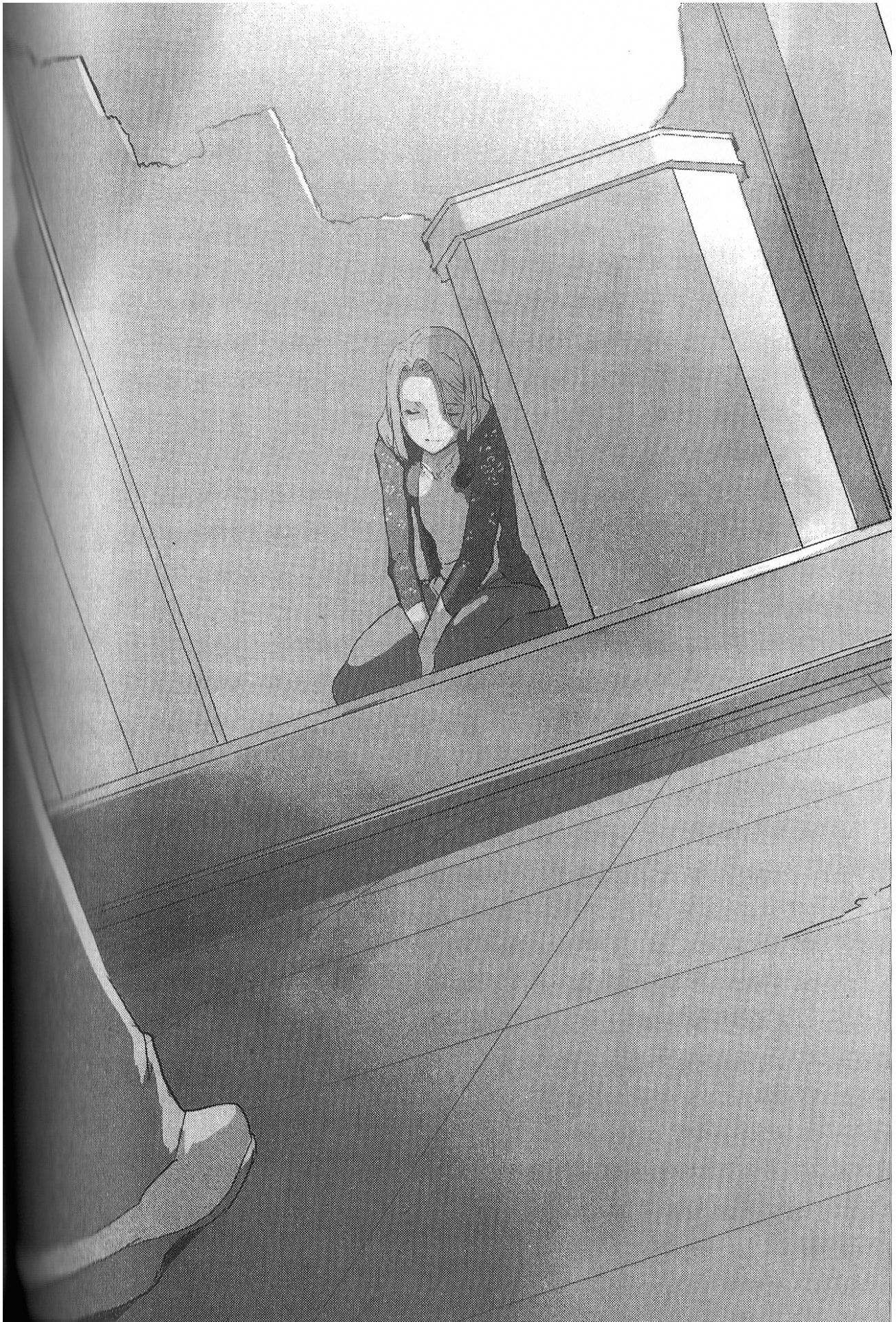
"Agh..."

Relic did not know where this sound was coming from.

It was a soundless scream. As he realized that the simple moan had come from his own throat, Relic covered his neck in an attempt to stop the noise.

"Agh... aaa, ahhh..."

But the air from his lungs knew no end, and along with his voice overflowed the emotions his instincts tried to hold back.



"-----"

An indescribable scream filled the church with grief, and the few glass windows that remained were shattered by an invisible force.

And when his endless scream finally ceased,

Something very simple happened to Relic von Waldstein.

He despaired at the world.

Interlude 3: The mayor doth declare candidacy!

Over ten years ago. An abandoned factory.

[Ah, here you are.]

"...That you, Lord of fucking everything? I was just thinking it might be pretty damned badass to get shot down by the cops." Watt snickered masochistically.

[This was the second favorite haunt of my friend Lorenz. And speaking of his favorite haunts... he was quite proud of how he met you at the abandoned church.]

"Tch. No shit. That's where he kicked out the whole crew I rounded up."

[Not so. He boasted about you. I still remember how his soul lit up as he said, 'I've found an interesting friend'. It was quite unusual for him to speak, not of his own exploits, but of someone else. I recall each and every word of that unusual conversation.]

"...So now you're here to get revenge for your old buddy." Watt said with a shrug.

Perhaps he had been shot by the police—his clothes were torn in places, his regenerating wounds peeking through the gaps.

But Gerhardt also made a gesture like he was shrugging, and wrote in a very firm font:

[I am not here to play the villain. I am quite certain that you are not the one who took his life.]

"What makes you so sure?"

[Perhaps you may be villainous enough to murder Lorenz in spite of the fact that he helped you. But you are not the sort of man to take off in fear after the act of killing him. You would sooner take an innocent hostage or set up an ambush, fighting the police force until, to your satisfaction, you turn to ash. I could not imagine you fleeing without putting up any sort of resistance.]

"Are you makin' fun of me, or are you trying to flatter me? Stick to one side, you little shit."

Ignoring Watt's irritation, Gerhardt continued.

[Also... I am coming back from seeing his body. There was a look of satisfaction on his face.]

"..."

[That is why the identity of his killer bothers me. I was merely wondering if, perhaps, you knew.]

"Is that any way to ask a human a favor?"

Though he was quite badly injured, Watt was forcing himself to put up a strong front. The viscount calmly continued.

[I understand that I am in no position to ask a favor of you. But I am not so magnanimous as to pass off my friend's death as part of some natural cycle of karma. Would you not tell me, Watt?]

There was nothing different about the way Gerhardt spoke. That was exactly why Watt knew how serious he was.

"Just come out and say it straight. You could've even threatened me from the beginning." He grumbled. Then, Watt exhaled quietly and recounted what he had seen.

"The one the stabbed the old bastard? It was his son."

[His son? That is a surprise.]

The viscount seemed shocked, but Watt could not tell if it was the existence of Lorenz's son or the fact of his stabbing that surprised him.

"First I heard about the guy, too. The old bastard sent me to get him a pack of cigarettes, and the next thing I know, he's hunched over getting stabbed by some asshole I'd never seen before."

There was a slight grin on his face, but not even Gerhardt could read the eyes behind Watt's sunglasses.

[And that was his son?]

"Didn't know back then, though."

They continued to speak, prodding for information, but Gerhardt could tell that Watt was not lying. Though he had no solid evidence, he did not even think of suspecting the young dhampyr. To be more accurate, it was a hopeful hunch that a young man Lorenz had found interesting would not lie about his death.

And, unusually for Watt, he confessed everything to the viscount at that point.

"I went up to the guy. I was gonna fuck him up, but the old bastard—the asshole stabbed him everywhere—he grabbed my leg and stopped me. And the shithead son of a bitch who stabbed him took off."

†

"...Why the hell'd you stop me, you fucking bastard?! The asshole stabbed you! The ambulance can wait until I pulverize that son of a bitch!" Watt cried without thinking. But the bloodied old man chuckled.

"...That's exactly why I stopped you."

"What?!"

Not understanding what the old man was saying, and not knowing what to do himself, Watt crouched down in front of Lorenz.

"Fine, fine. I'll call a doctor! We can talk later!"

"It's too late, boy. Wounds like this are a bit too much for an old man like me." Lorenz said, although he didn't sound at all urgent. Watt snapped back in confusion.

"Th-this is insane! Wh-why the hell d'you get stabbed, anyway?! Why?! That son of a bitch just now looked even younger than me. He was shaking like a fucking leaf! I can take him. I'll catch up and—"

The old man guffawed and shook his head weakly.

"Never you mind. This is family business. There's nothing for you to do—leave this to the police."

"What the hell're you talking about?"

"That boy just now is my son. I got a woman pregnant on this island when I was sixty-five." Lorenz said nonchalantly.

"...The fuck?!" Watt exclaimed.

"That's a perfectly normal reaction. But anyway... Things might've been simpler if I were just another casanova, but there was a lot going on at the time."

According to Lorenz, he had gotten into some trouble with a smuggling ring that worked on the mainland. Fearing for the safety of his lover and their unborn child, he had willingly chosen a life of homelessness.

The son had no idea about his father's situation, and resented him for abandoning the family. His hatred slowly led him into delinquency, and by some chance, he ended up being ordered by a gang to carry out a certain task.

The old man at the abandoned church, who prevented the gang from setting up base on the island—if he were to kill the old man, the gang would accept him into their ranks and give him the job of go-between for Growerth and the mainland. And depending on his accomplishments, they even promised him leadership over smuggling jobs on Growerth.

Believing their offer, the boy was, in a way, much like Watt in the past. Wanting to be a heavyweight of the underworld, he chose to murder an old man.

Not knowing that the old man was his own father.

"I knew, you see... At first I thought he just wanted revenge for the way I left him and his mother. So I let him stab me."

"What the hell?! Are you out of your fucking mind?!" Watt swore, but the old man nodded with a grin.

"Hah hah. I once made a vow to myself. If the son I abandoned came to kill me one day, I would let him take my life."

"...That makes no sense! You did that for your woman and the kid!"

"That doesn't matter. If I were a little more clever, or a little stronger... if I had been a little more cunning with the smuggling ring, I never would have had to abandon them in the first place. Even when the gang went quiet for a while, I didn't know how I'd face my son. So I never did. That's why I deserved to be stabbed."

His expression clouded over.

"But... do you know what he said when he stabbed me? 'Sorry, old guy. Now I'm set to join the gang'. Then I thought, wait—this boy doesn't even know that I'm his father."

"...Hey."

The old man grinned, blood spilling from his mouth, and continued impishly.

"I didn't mind being killed, but I couldn't just let him go not knowing. so I said, 'take care of your mother. And those smugglers, by the way—they'd kill her without a second thought, so don't even think about joining them'."

"Aren't you supposed to keep your mouth shut at a time like that?!" Watt hissed, forgetting for a moment that Lorenz was gravely wounded.

The old man chuckled in agreement.

"I'm no saint. I've told you before—I was a gang member. But that boy of mine has a surprisingly good head on his shoulders. I think he understood what I meant. He started trembling, saying I must have been lying. That was when you came in."

"That's why you let him go."

"Calm down. Leave the boy. Whether he has the gall to join the smuggling ring, whether he turns himself in, or commits suicide... that's all up to him. But I still couldn't let him be beaten to death. I had to stop you."

At that point, Watt began to stop fearing for the old man. Though he was covered in wounds, a dying man could not possibly talk so much, he reasoned. The wounds must not have been life-threatening. There was a great deal of blood pooled around Lorenz, but it was not nearly enough to kill him.

Watt slowly regained his calm and returned to his senses.

"...And you think that's going to help your kid, old man?"

"Who knows? But I won't be able to rest easy if you became a murderer on account of my family."

"Cut your worryin'. I'm a vampire."

"Not completely, you aren't. You're half human. Listen up. Since you're neither human nor vampire, you don't need to abandon either side. You're a cunning young man. You can deal with them both. ...And now that I think about it, whenever I see Gerhardt, he never stops talking about you. I see he must be just as entertained as I am."

Lorenz snorted and continued.

"All this blood reminds me of the viscount. Boy. Open up that pack I sent you to get."

"Enough about the fucking blood monster." Watt spat, and handed the pack of cigarettes to the old man.

As usual, Lorenz opened up the pack and lit a cigarette with a lighter from his pocket.

'I knew it. This guy's completely fine.'

"Heh. Try to be friends with him, eh? I think you'll make a fine team."

"Fuck off." Watt replied. Lorenz gave a wry smile and inhaled.

"Feels good. Put the money on my tab."

'He's gonna live to be a hundred at the rate he's going.'

Watt frowned, but he thought he should try and stop Lorenz's bleeding. The old man continued to speak.

"I was scared to face my son. I thought I might make up for it somehow by looking after young punks like the Geissendorfer boy... but I was wrong. Helping people doesn't absolve you of your sins."

"Took you long enough, genius."

"'Look after' my ass. All he did was send me on errands." Watt grinned, about to voice his thought—

"But I don't regret... looking after you punks."

With a triumphant smile, almost too full of life for a man past eighty—

His cigarette fell into the pool of blood.

And Watt realized that he could never curse at the old man again.

†

"...Shit. I'm half-vampire. How the hell was I supposed to know how much blood a human can lose before kicking the bucket?" Watt shrugged. "After that, I got caught by a cop who happened to be passing by. And now I'm a wanted man."

Watt was laughing. Gerhardt replied calmly and gravely.

[I have a contact on the police force. I will speak with my friend immediately.]

"...You looking down on me? Like hell I'm gonna be in your debt."

[Make no mistake. This is my gift to Lorenz. He will not want you to be arrested and sentenced for a crime you did not commit. No more than he would want his own son arrested.]

"Whatever. I'm not gonna thank you. I'm not obligated to, anyway."

With a click of the tongue, Watt turned his gaze to the scene around him and changed the topic.

"First an abandoned church. And now an abandoned factory. This island is full of goddamned rubble."

[I fear I cannot deny that observation. This island was a more energetic place in the past.]

"The old bastard said... He got into that shit with the smugglers 'cause they were trying to use this island."

With a crack of the neck he continued, his tone almost joking in nature.

"With this economy, there's obviously gonna be asshats who jump at the chance to join 'em. And law enforcement here's a fucking joke. The old bastard went out and ran circles around 'em instead of staying in his fucking bed like a geezer should, and ended up getting into one hell of a mess."

[What are you trying to say?]

"If this island were in better shape, things might have been different." Watt said, curiosity and resentment filling his voice.

Gerhardt did not shy away from the unspoken question.

[I understand what you are trying to say, and I'll not deny your accusation. Though I call myself the Lord of Growerth, I am powerless to intervene in matters of economy and politics.]

"All right. But if you just set your goons loose on the smugglers, they'd be fish bait by this point. Well? There's no law that applies to you vampires. You can technically do whatever the hell you feel like with 'em."

[Indeed, I am a vampire. Perhaps if the Church were involved, things might be different—but I cannot be brought to justice in a human court. But that does not mean that I believe I can behave as I please.] Gerhardt wrote in a dignified font. Watt chuckled bitterly and clicked his tongue.

"A hundred points for the teacher's pet. You know what? You're right. You are. But I'm not gonna accept you, whether you're right or wrong, Count—wait, scratch that. I *will* accept you, then I'll swallow you whole."

[An interesting thought. But I would like to ask why you insist on calling me a count.] Gerhardt scolded gently. Watt snorted.

"Heh. You said you got the nonexistent title because you don't actually exist? Fucking hell. A dhampyr like me can see you right here. And you're even going around like a shit hypocrite—don't you have any shame? 'Count' is more than good enough for you, asshole."

[Ah, that is an understandable reason. But I would prefer, for clarity's sake, that you correct yourself and call me a viscount.] Wrote the pool of blood, trembling as though in laughter.

Watt snorted again. Then, though his injuries were still not healed, he got to his feet.

"You know when I'll call you a viscount? When you do something that I can't."

Having passed on Lorenz's final words, Watt turned. He was no longer under any obligation to speak to the man who believed in his innocence.

"But before that... I'll do stuff that you'll never even dream of."

†

The next day, the smugglers on the island were arrested. As a result, an investigation on the organization on the mainland began as well.

Officers responded to a report about gunshots coming from the alleys the previous night. There, they found a group of delinquents who had been beaten unconscious, their hands and feet tied up. A short distance away they found a young man crumpled on the floor, his knees weak. The young man testified that he had been tricked by the smugglers into stabbing his own father to death. When he had realized that his target was his father, the young man had complained to the smugglers and was nearly killed.

Things were quite clear up to that point, but the rest of the young man's testimony was deemed a hallucination brought on by the shock of killing his own father.

"It was a vampire... A vampire saved me! They shot him so many times I thought for sure he was dead... but then his body turned into bats, and...!"

'*Ah, a vampire.*' Thought some members of the police force, but as they could not record such information on official reports, they instead made it so that the young man was rescued by a passing martial artist.

By the time Gerhardt realized from that story that Watt had been shot, not by the police, but the smugglers hiding on the island—

Watt Stalf had already disappeared from Growerth.

†

Present day. On the back of a truck in Southern Germany.

[I had assumed that his wounds were from a confrontation with the police. But the reason he sounded like he had overcome Lorenz's death when I spoke to him was because he had already done what was necessary. Though I was surprised that he had for the first time

accomplished the feat of transforming his body into bats, I was also shocked that he had defeated the smugglers without taking a single life.]

Gerhardt shook as he reminisced about the nostalgic past.

[He disappeared for some time afterwards. How shocked I was when I heard Watt's name next. Having graduated from university, he had joined a political party and declared candidacy for mayor!]

"And now he's the mayor of your island."

[When he spoke of something that I could not do, I first thought that he was speaking of defeating the smugglers. But when I thought on it, I remembered that, at that point, he had already defeated them. And what he said was indeed true—he could run for candidacy because he had records as a human being.]

"That was around the time he came into contact with us." Melhilm said, thinking over what he heard of Watt's past. "As a vampire, he is nothing but a violent petty villain. But... you're right. I take back what I said about his being scum. ...However, that does not mean that I forgive him. You will not convince me to forget that he is my enemy."

Gerhardt shook happily at his friend's declaration.

[And I will not try to convince you otherwise, my friend. You reap what you sow. So long as you do not involve the people of the island, as you did during the Carnale Festival, I have nothing about which to complain.]

"I still don't understand. What in the world do you see Watt Stalf as?"

[I consider him an excellent rival. After all, he is the noblest of petty villains.]

Slowly raising his body, Gerhardt continued.

[If Waldstein Castle reigns over the Night, as the guardian of the vampires, Mayor Stalf is the guardian of the Day—of the humans. Of course, he seems to be quite fond of working late. Perhaps he will one day try to extend his guardianship to the Night as well.]

Chapter 4: Despair & Hope doth clash!

The island of Growerth. Downtown Neuberg.

The occurrence was a minor one, but one strange and large enough to worry the people.

"...Is something... shaking?" People wondered, exchanging glances.

It was already deep into night, and many were already asleep. But people awoke to the sound of their windows shaking in their frames, and realized that their own bodies were also trembling slightly.

Not many noticeable earthquakes occurred in Germany; most people were not used to such tremors.

But the tremors were not enough to make the people fear for their lives—yet. The sensation of the ground shaking beneath them merely nurtured the anxiety growing in their hearts.

It was as though the ground itself was afraid of something.

†

Underground caverns.

In the caverns under the castle, Valdred Ivanhoe's eyes flew open.

Because the jester never did go to wake him, Val had no idea what was going on.

But he was suddenly jolted awake by a sensation like part of his very body was being torn away. He quickly looked down at himself.

Soon realizing that he was only looking over his usual illusionary body—that of a young boy—he slowly calmed himself and turned his gaze to his true body—the island of Growerth.

"Is something the matter, Val? ...Oh? What's this shaking?"

From the great flower bud next to him came the voice of his fellow plant vampire, Selim Vergès. A vine as thick as a man's arm brought a pair of glasses into the petals, and a bespectacled young girl poked her face out of the tip of the bud.

She was not the only one; others who were in the caverns, absorbed in a game of mahjong, gathered around curiously.

Everyone knew by then that the island was shaking sporadically—they all turned to Val, wondering if perhaps a volcano was erupting.

"What... what is this...?"

Val trembled, his eyes closed shut. Selim turned to him with a worried look.

"Are you all right, Val? What's going on?"

"...Selim."

Though the body of the boy was just an illusion created by Val's consciousness, it directly expressed his emotions, just as Gerhardt's words did for him. The boy's face paled in an instant, and cold sweat began running down his body. The others around them also realized that something was very wrong.

What Val said to them was extremely simple:

"I have no idea what's going on, either. But... you should get away from this island as quickly as possible."

†

Inside Waldstein Castle.

"Oh? An earthquake in Germany? I'm rather surprised."

For Mage, who was from Japan, earthquakes were nothing remarkable. But his indifference quickly dissipated as the tremors continued for more than thirty seconds.

"This is a bit long..." He said with a frown.

Having awakened only after dusk, he also sensed another strange thing about his surroundings.

"...Where *is* everyone?"

The maids in green and his fellow freeloaders were nowhere to be seen or sensed.

Wondering if something had happened outside, he quickly turned to a balcony.

At that moment, a familiar flock of bats swarmed in and materialized into the form of the mayor.

"Ack! Mr. Staaaaargh!"

"Good evening to you too, Fucking Mage. Where's the princeling and his maids?"

Mage was sent flying with a roundhouse kick. The mayor then stomped on his back.

As he drove his groaning former subordinate into the floor, Watt realized that something was amiss.

"...What the hell. This castle's shaking."

"I-I was just wondering about it myself, Mr. Stalf! And it doesn't seem as though there's anyone in the castle!"

Being the type to yield to authority, Mage chuckled apologetically even as Watt's shoe dug into his back.

"Th-this shaking's gone on for more than a minute—it's different from the earthquakes I—"

Ignoring Mage, Watt returned to the balcony he landed at and surveyed the island.

A moment later, as his gaze reached western Growerth, he took notice of something unusual.

Part of the stars over the west were gone.

There was a straight line of pitch-black darkness, reaching so far above the ground that he had to crane his neck to see the end.

As though a black pillar higher than the atmosphere had suddenly materialized on the island.

As Watt squinted for a better look, he realized that the object was indeed a pillar of sorts—

And with the shaking of the ground, he recalled the power of a certain vampire.

"Can't be... Relic?"

†

Several minutes earlier.

The first to witness the tremors and the disappearance of the stars were the vampires who had followed after Relic from the castle.

Unable to catch up to Relic and Watson's speed, they were slightly late to arrive on the scene.

"Where is Master Relic?!"

"Hey! I see the werewolf girl!" Pirie cried. Everyone turned—the silver-haired girl was opening the door of the church.

"Hilda's in there?"

"To be honest, I'm getting a real bad feeling about this."

The moment the freeloaders exchanged nervous glances,

"_____"

A cry that shook the very air around them filled their ears.

But it was only for the first few seconds that they could tell that the sound was coming from the ruined church.

There was a moment of silence, followed by every window in the building shattering at once. Black fog began spilling outside.

But that sight, too, lasted for only the blink of an eye.

The fog instantly turned into a powerful shockwave as it swallowed the entire church in a dark mist.

"What?! What?! What's going on here?!" Pirie yelled, losing her balance in a state of half-fog.

Though they were not very close to the church, the icy wave had crashed over them as well. The werewolf called Watson just barely avoided being engulfed, quickly backing away from the church.

When the gale stopped, the vampires sensed that the direction of the wind had changed. Those who were running on foot realized that the ground underneath was shaking.

"H-hey... this is crazy..."

Unlike the humans, who wondered if the island was struck by an earthquake, the vampires witnessed the source of the tremor.

The ground was disappearing under them, starting from the place where the church used to be.

The stone building was already nowhere to be seen, and the black mist ravaged the ground to the point of dissipation, creating a maelstrom in the center.

The maelstrom was only the size of two tennis courts, but as it ate away at the ground, it grew larger and larger. In the very middle was a great black pillar of mist, so tall that it erased a line of stars from the sky.

"What is this mist...?" One of the maids wondered. Pirie, who finally found her footing, replied with her eyes wide.

"Hey... you know? This doesn't look like fog... what... what is that?"

She was not the only one to notice. Some of the vampires with above-average eyesight noticed the true nature of the black pillar.

It looked like the fog had condensed into water, flowing in a vicious stream. Its color came from the countless bats coursing inside the pillar.

The current and the bats swam swiftly, shifting from water to creature, moving more like a hologram sticker than a squirming entity.

One of the vampires, whose eyesight was even better, glimpsed something terrifying and looked away without thinking.

"Hey, what's wrong?!"

"What did you see?!"

As the other freeloaders pressed for answers, the vampire frowned.

"...Those bats... they don't have eyes."

Countless bats without eyes flew into the night sky in a pitch-black current.

As though they were refusing to look upon the world.

†

Several minutes later.

'What is this...?!'

Dorrikey only noticed the disaster as he flew to northern Growerth in the form of a flock of bats.

The black pillar was threatening to topple Everest in height. If not for the night vision inherent in his vampiric nature, he would have thought that the stars had disappeared.

Dorrikey could tell immediately that the pillar was no cloud or twister.

'This is outrageous. I'm a detective, not a superhero.'

'This isn't a deduction, but... it feels as though Watson may be involved!'

With that thought, he carefully approached the pillar—

(Correct. Your partner's involved somewhat. I should have expected as much from an Ace Detective.)

A familiar voice spoke into his head.

(Mirald?! Where are you?!)

Although his friend was a telepath, unlike Hawking, his range was limited. Dorrikey quickly looked around, guessing that Mirald must be nearby.

Then, he spotted the silhouette standing on a transmission tower beside him and began circling it in bat-form.

"So you found me. That's an Ace Detective for you. I expected nothing less."

(This is no time for sarcastic comments! What in the world is that thing?! And is it true that Watson is involved? She can't be trapped inside, can she?! Why are you hanging back here? We must hurry and rescue her!)

In less than a second Dorrikey transmitted countless questions to Mirald, but the latter answered them all without stumbling.

"All right. I'll answer one at a time. That pillar over there is Relic—Mr. Gerhardt's son. Your partner was with him until just now, but she's moved to safer ground and is talking to the vampires from Waldstein Castle. They're too far for me to read their minds, but don't worry—she's not being held prisoner."

With a shrug, Mirald continued.

"In other words, your partner is in absolutely no need of assistance. Relax."

(Preposterous! What is going on over there? You mean that the pillar of bats over there is Mr. Gerhardt's son?! Why would he make something like this on the island? I know you've already read his thoughts—I demand answers!)

"Of course I have. I turned into thin fog and crept into range to read the details of his thoughts. Although Watson almost caught my scent." Mirald chuckled. A flock of bats swarmed around his face.

"Hey, Dorrikey, stop that! Telepathy doesn't give me the power to avoid your attacks! Do you have any idea how much of a pain it is to turn to fog—"

As some of the bats began pulling on one of his ears, Mirald nearly cried out in pain. And as though focusing all his thoughts into the ear, Dorrikey let his heart shout as loudly as he wanted.

(Stop dawdling and get to the point!)

"All right, all right. It's simple. Not too long ago, his human girlfriend's heart was carved out. By the serial killer everyone's been talking about these days."

(What...?!)

Dorrikey's thoughts came screeching to a halt. Mirald clapped his hands and laughed.

"You want to know why Mr. Gerhardt's son is doing that? No reason, really. He's just in despair at the world. All of *that*? It's his anger at the world and himself. It was so human of him that it hit me—yes, he really must be Mr. Gerhardt's son."

†

"Hey—Watson, right? What just happened here?!" Pirie asked, half-flying over to Watson. The silver-haired girl looked down and replied plainly.

"Hilda was covered in blood. A hole in her chest. She won't move. Hilda's friend screamed."

Though her words were simple, all who listened instantly realized what Relic must have happened to Hilda. They exchanged bewildered glances.

"It can't be..."

Unable to believe that Hilda was dead, Pirie made to scold Watson—but the werewolf didn't seem the type to lie.

"And? And? What about Relic?" She asked instead.

Watson sniffed the air. Then, she pointed up at the great black pillar.

"All of that. It's Hilda's friend."

Then, she lowered her hand to the bottom of the maelstrom—which was now twice its original size.

"Hilda... is somewhere there."

†

At the base of the pillar of bats, in the middle of the great maelstrom that expanded as it ate away at the island, Hilda's body was floating without a sound.

Relic's body was nowhere.

To be specific, his body had already transformed into fog and countless bats, synchronizing with the island and transforming into something indescribably gigantic.

But his consciousness—the hazy sense of reason that could no longer control his actions—remained tangled around Hilda.

'Hilda.

'...I'm so sorry.

'How? How did this happen?'

But even his sense of reason was not enough to stop the flood of despair.

A part of Relic's mind was asking over and over—why did he have to lose Hilda? But most of his emotions, as though casting aside such brooding, cornered Relic with unstoppable fury and despair.

With no intention in particular,

The boy created to reign over all vampires decided to leave all his powers to his emotions.
Just like a frustrated child banging on the wall until even his hand turned bloody,
Perhaps he merely wanted to turn his outrage at something—anything—at full force.

Not realizing just how much power he held in his hands.

†

(Then is our only option to wait for his anger to abate?) Dorrikey asked. Mirald shrugged.

"I could calm down a rampaging monster if it had any sense of reason left in its head. I could try directly showing an illusion of his girlfriend in his mind, but I don't know her well enough to pull it off. And right now, I can't exactly read his memories to get a grasp on her... I'm so thirsty that I'm having trouble holding back my powers." Mirald chuckled. Dorrikey, flitting around him, raised his voice in his head.

(Wait! I thought you said you'd last until—)

"Sorry. I lied. Actually, no. At that point I wasn't lying, but I overestimated myself."

(Damn you!...!)

"Hey, there's an interesting thought. I can read other people's minds, but I don't know nearly enough about myself. It's like one of those twists in those detective novels you like. Although I don't think you'd ever find a detective or a criminal who can read minds in those stories." Mirald commented, as though he had nothing to do with the unfolding disaster. Dorrikey finally made up his mind to call the ancient shark vampire to swallow Mirald whole.

Reading his friend's thoughts, Mirald continued as nonchalantly as ever.

"I don't really want to end up in George's stomach—what if I get sliced between his teeth? ...Anyway, I've heard that Relic could turn entire chunks of the island into a gigantic wolf. But look at him now, completely out of his mind—maybe what I heard was just an exaggeration. Relic's only affecting a tiny portion of the island."

(This is no time for casual observations!) Dorrikey cried, just about ready to swear at Mirald.

But suddenly, the laughter was wiped off Mirald's face as his brow and lips began twitching.

(What. What is it.)

It took several seconds for Mirald to finally respond and smile again.

But there was something off about his smile.

"This isn't good."

(Details!)

"Well, I just had a long talk with Hawking."

(...)

Although it had only been several seconds, the passage of time had little effect on the dense conversations that telepaths could have.

But what worried Dorrikey more was the fact that Mirald looked like he was at a complete loss—so instead of interjecting, he waited for him to continue.

"Hawking's been watching the island from there, too. And, well..."

Mirald paused, closing his mouth. Then, his grin grew bitter as he resumed.

"Apparently the earth is in danger."

(.....What?)

For a moment, Dorrikey's mind went blank.

"Well, you know how Hawking's good at calculations and analysis. He gave this situation of ours a little thought, and... he says that Relic's not using his powers... yet."

(...‘Yet’?)

"In other words, he's just pulling back his fist. In archery terms, he's pulled back the string as far as it can go. Just like holding down a spring, he's compressed all his power to the limit. So he can unleash it all in one go."

The flock of bats composing Dorrikey's body simultaneously turned to the black pillar.

(Wait. You mean to say that that gigantic mass over there is Relic's power compressed to its limit?)

"It already feels like there's a mountainload of explosives stacked up here. So Hawking ran calculations on it for fun, too. He wanted to see what would happen if Relic really lashed out with that fist."

With his right hand, Mirald pushed up his glasses and sighed.

"About the size of the moon."

"The moon?"

"In other words... something the size of the moon will instantly turn into bats or fogs or wolves or something—it'll become a part of him."

This was no time for jokes, Dorrikey wanted to think, but he knew that Mirald wouldn't so far as to bring Hawking into a joke.

So shocked was he that Dorrikey could do little but keep his bats flapping in the air.

Meanwhile, Mirald cracked his neck, sounding surprised that he was finally a part of the impending catastrophe.

"God help us all. Wonder what it'll be. The mantle? The crust? The atmosphere? Doubts the Iridescent might call even that entertainment, but to be honest, I'd prefer if the earth wasn't destroyed. I hate the sun. and it'd be pretty irritating to have no one but Hawking to talk to." Mirald worried, as though confident that he could survive the destruction of the earth.

He began to look around the ground from atop the transmission tower. Then,

"There."

(What? Where?) Dorrikey asked. Mirald replied indifferently.

"I found your serial killer."

(...What?!)

Listening to the sound of his friend's thoughts falling into disarray, Mirald looked down—there was the TV crew, filming the pillar of bats from a different location than Watson and the others.

"I'll drop down over there for a bit. Gotta let off a bit of steam for both me and Relic."

(What do you mean?) Asked Dorrikey. Mirald's eyes were hidden behind his glasses, but the usual smile had returned to his lips.

"I'm going to play loudspeaker for them. That might quench a bit of my thirst."

(Damn it. This is no time to be thinking idly. What exactly are you planning?) Asked the self-proclaimed Ace Detective. The bespectacled vampire, still smiling, replied,

(I'm just going to point him in the right direction. Help the confused kid find the heartless killer who murdered his girlfriend.)

†

The western side of the island was far from the cities, had no significant tourist attractions, and after the church burned down, had very few residences.

In other words, the only 'human' eyes on the unfolding catastrophe belonged to the members of the ZZZ Network TV crew.

The sound recordist bit his tongue again and again, wondering if he was dreaming. But with each sharp pain he became more and more certain that the scene before them was reality.

A chilling breeze had suddenly engulfed them.

When the black pillar had first appeared, the wind had blown toward them from it.

But now, the wind was blowing in the opposite direction—from behind their backs and to the squirming pillar, as though the air around them was being sucked into it.

The apocalypse.

Although the disaster only engulfed a part of the island, and they alone were witness to the sight, it seemed very much like the end was near.

'The hell... the hell's going on here?!' The recordist wondered.

Until not too long ago, he and the other crew members were in what he was sure was reality. But his memories cut off as soon as they began to approach the supposed werewolf for an interview, and when they opened their eyes, they were in a parking lot halfway up the mountain.

And a blond-haired boy transformed himself into a flock of bats right before their eyes, taking to the skies.

The sound recordist had wondered if he was still half-asleep. But the other crew members said that they saw it as well, and his superior—Juna, the bespectacled reporter—was already engaged in an excited interview with the girl who had been standing there.

'And... and... I don't remember. Juna woke me up, then the ground started shaking...'

As his senses came into focus, he again looked forward.

Only after dozens of seconds of staring at the sight did an incredible sense of unease well up in him. He finally spoke, his fingertips trembling.

"...What is this... What the hell is this, Juna...?!"

Juna shot him a stern look.

"Cut the crap and get back to work! We're witnessing history in the making—no! We're watching logic itself fall to bits!"

Dumbstruck by Juna's determination, the other crew members exchanged glances. The cameraman silently continued to shoot the pillar and the maelstrom, his expression inscrutable.

"If you want to run, then go ahead. I'll just take the camera and get this footage myself."

There was a glint of manic ecstasy in the woman's voice, as though the story of the century was close at hand.

There was no talking her out of it, the sound recordist thought, and turned to the other crew members.

The cameraman's eyes were hidden, but the others were clearly just as worried and hesitant as he was.

'We've gotta get out of here...'

The others were probably thinking the same thing. They sounded quite different to his ears, mumbling "I want to leave" and "I can't take this anymore".

One of the crew members was even wanting to see his little sister back home—

'...Wait.'

At that point, the man... realized something.

'A little sister? What?'

There was no voice. The face of another crew member's little sister forced its way into his mind with ease, as though he had heard her speak.

And for some reason, though he had never met the girl before, he was certain that she was the sister of his friend.

'What is this... what's going on here?'

Flowing into his confused thoughts was one powerful sequence of images.

Sensing the current of memories entering his mind, the man paled and shook his head.

'Am I hallucinating now?!'

(I'm seeing things, aren't I?) (No, no, no... that's the girl from before...)

When he looked around, the other crew members were also shaking their heads in fear, muttering to themselves the same things he was thinking in his head. In fact, upon closer inspection, he realized that none of their mouths were moving. And yet their voices were ringing clear in his head.

'Right. Let's just get out of here.'

The sound recordist made up his mind, and slowly backed away—

(((((■ ■)))

"AAARGH!"

Something indescribable forced its way into his head, making him scream.

The other crew members must have experienced the same thing, as they were all also crying out or curled up on the ground. Juna was also clearly scared, but her eyes would not leave the pillar of bats.

'No.'

That was the only word that came to mind.

What flowed into his thoughts was not a sound, and not an image.

It felt like raw emotions had forced themselves into his heart.

Though there were no words to the emotion, the sound recordist understood what it was saying—and came to a conclusion.

The emotion was a reaction to the decision he had just made earlier.

'I won't let you escape.'

'Not you, not anyone.'

†

Dozens of seconds earlier.

Darkness.

At the time, there was no consciousness within Relic.

To be specific, though he knew that he was doing *something* in the deep darkness, he did not know what he was doing, or what he wanted.

It was the sensation of his body moving on its own, as if in a dream. A vague feeling that only bordered on the waking world—both conscious and unconscious.

His despair overshadowed any anger or grief he might have had—and his emotions, ruled by that despair, united with his power and became a great black current surrounding Hilda's body.

The consciousness of Relic the individual, and the incredible power of Relic the vampire.

The two factors, which should normally have existed on completely different vectors, began melding into a complex tangle as they distorted Relic's very identity.

Though his consciousness was spreading to the world, his power was slowly gathering.

His hazy consciousness was swept up in the currents of power.

Though he had no clear sense of self, once in a while, a piece of his consciousness bobbed to the surface of the current and disappeared again.

Floating like mud in that irregular stream of self were remorse and words of apology.

I'm sorry, Hilda

I... couldn't protect you

I'm sorry, Michael

I couldn't protect Hilda

I should apologize again

I don't think I can hold myself back

I'm sorry if I kill you by mistake

Father, Ferret, I'm sorry

I guess I wasn't the best family to you

Goodbye everyone

Everyone—

disappear

—just

His consciousness sank to the bottom of the sea of despair.

Relic raised Hilda's body into his core.

But at that point, even Hilda was but a symbol to him.

It was impossible for a mindless body to have hope.

And even if his mind was there,

All that awaited him was the despair of Hilda with her heart carved out.

But change came to that darkness.

A certain scene played out before Relic's dissipating consciousness.

An image of Hilda appeared. Several pieces of awareness floating down the current of power instantly snapped together.

'Hil...da...?'

His drowning sense of self was pulled along by the scene.

Though his consciousness had not fully awakened, he believed that something there would save him.

But the scene was not a ray of hope.

The image that was forcibly inserted into his mind was a reenactment of despair.

A slender arm leaned the barely-conscious Hilda against the altar in the church.

The owner of the arm placed a strange device to Hilda's chest.

'Stop.'

The contraption looked like a warped torture device.

'Stop... don't do it.'

But along with the scene came the will of the owner of the strange device, echoing into his mind.

*'UnbelievableStopitbloodlustisStopitgoingtokillStopitherStopitnothewillStopittomurderherSto
pitisflowingintoStopitmyhead*

*'AslenderlegStopitonthedeviceStopitStopitoverHilda'schestStopitStopitStopitsteppingStopitSt
opitStopitdownStopitStopitStopitStopitfirmlyandaStopitStopitnauseatingnoiseStopitStopitfills
thechurchStopitStopitStopitStopitStopitI'llkillyouI'llkillyouI'llkillyouI'llkillyouI'llkillyouI'llkillyou
andyougoanyfurtherandI'llslaughter—'*

There was a splatter of blood as her heart was carved out.

But that was not the end.

The same scene repeated itself again and again.

Relic realized something—that these were the memories of Hilda's killer. That the killer had run the scenario over in their mind countless times.

And the emotions that accompanied the scene also told him:

That the culprit was happy to have killed Hilda.

'I'll slaughter you.'

Hatred enough to shake off all his guilt awakened Relic's consciousness.

And the incredible power that controlled his sense of reason came under the control of his endless outrage.

Of course, no one could tell the difference anyway, and Mirald, the one who manipulated him into the change, had nothing backing up his gamble.

†

"Hey."

The freeloader with the best eyesight noticed a change in the pillar of bats.

"Their eyes..."

Blue light began to radiate from the faces of the countless bats filling the current.

Their missing eyes emerged at once, emitting eerie light. Though that glow, as well, was instantly swallowed by the current, the lights signaled a change in the pillar.

In the midst of rising to the sky, the pillar began to branch as it transformed into a great black tree.

And the moment each and every branch began reaching for the ground, Pirie and the others realized—

That each branch was in the shape of a black human hand.

Hundreds—thousands—tens of thousands of hands shot out toward the ground.

The castle's residents braced themselves for a moment, but they quickly realized that they were not the targets.

"Hey... look! Over there! There's people with a TV camera!"

"...! No!"

Sensing danger, the maids in green, who numbered at over a dozen, gathered in groups of four and leapt to rescue the humans.

But the branches merged into one, turning into a giant hand as it swung at the humans at incredible speed. The humans seemed to have tried to escape, but small arms made of shadows had slithered from the maelstrom and grabbed them by their ankles.

"...We won't make it!"

'We mustn't let Master Relic commit murder! Even if he kills humans, it can't be in such an ambiguous way!' The maids thought, charging forward, but they had little hope of making it in time.

"No... no, Relic! You can't!" The jester cried, flying off toward the great tree, but Relic showed no signs of listening.

A single vampire's despair and rage took on the form of a hand, making to crush the humans underneath.

"What a ridiculous story. Although I do sympathize." Mirald mumbled indifferently, getting a slight distance away. "Now... even if he kills those humans like this and gets revenge..."

At that point, Mirald held back his words and said them aloud only in his head.

'If he remains in despair afterwards, the earth just might be finished.'

Whether or not a third party anticipated the end of the world, the vampire who reigned over the island transformed his despair into power.

The vampires of the island were seized by the despair of being unable to stop him.

Those who were merely human simply despaired at the fact that they had no way of escaping death.

Except for Watson, who remained completely oblivious, most of those present were caught in the web of despair.

But at that moment, a sort of hope descended like a shooting star.

The small, unassuming, and incredibly petty star of hope known as Watt Stalf.

†

If Relic von Waldstein was a great tree made up of countless bats, the object falling from overhead was a meteor.

A jet-black projectile, so dark that human eyes could barely see. The mass, about the size of a four-ton truck, rammed the black arm with the force of a missile.

And in the blink of an eye, the bats from the sky transformed into a literal four-ton truck.

The great hand was forced to a stop by the mass of metal. Creating countless smaller hands under the tree, the maelstrom absorbed the impact.

If the tree had transformed into fog, the kinetic energy would have gone through it—but the tree purposely deflected the attack.

Relic must have been subconsciously trying to protect Hilda's body.

Not knowing what was happening inside, and not even trying to know, Watt took human form and stood before Relic, who could not do the same.

In his usual human form, the mayor looked endlessly tiny compared to the great tree.

Cracking his neck, the mayor turned his gaze to the monster forming before him. Though physically he was looking up, his eyes beneath his sunglasses were clearly looking down on Relic.

"Little Relic. I know you're just itching to show off at your age, but isn't this a bit much?"

Where was his confidence coming from? Watt sounded condescending to the end.

"First off, put that church back where it was. Then I just might let you off the hook halfway." He demanded without a hint of fear. Relic did not react.

Although it was hard to tell if Watt's words had reached Relic, the latter raised one of his countless hands to silence Watt.

"Master Watt!" The jester cried, snapped out of her daze by the sight of the attack.

Yet Watt looked up defiantly, not taking a single step.

One of the freeloaders, assuming that Watt was petrified with fear, mumbled that he was going to die.

But the mayor spoke, not moving an inch.

Neither relaxed, anxious, nor prepared to heroically sacrifice himself. Without nothing but irritation coloring his voice.

"...You've got no right to fuck around with the place, you little shit."

At that moment, countless bats rose up from behind him, creating a massive wall.

A second later, a wolf's jaws bigger than an elephant emerged and tore off the great black hand that lunged toward him.

"?! "!" "What?!" "Shit!" "...! ...?! " "Whoa?!" "!" "?!"

The castle's vampires gasped.

Even the ever-indifferent maids watched Watt, astonished.

The jester, flying through the air in half-fog form, stopped in midair with her jaw on the ground.

And whether he noticed the reactions or not, Watt snorted at Relic's massive shadow.

"...Heh. You surprised I can pull tricks like that, little princeling?"

With his usual sneer, Watt confidently spread his arms and created a maelstrom of fog under his feet, just like Relic's.

Although it was smaller in scale, the maelstrom steadily grew larger and larger as it ate away at the ground.



And as though unaffected by Watt's show of power, Relic created yet more branches on the tree, materializing nearly twenty gigantic arms over Growerth.

He was probably planning to destroy Watt with all the arms at once. Or perhaps he would use several as decoys while the rest attacked the humans.

Watt stood his ground, not caring. The maelstrom under him expanded rapidly, finally at the width of a small pond.

"All right. Fine. Looks like you're holed up too far in those bats to listen to reason."

Standing in the middle of the maelstrom, Watt gave one very simple command:

"Go to hell and come back to apologize to me, you little shit."

†

"Is that... the mayor?"

Spotting the mysterious vampire who appeared out of nowhere to rescue them, Juna realized that the man resembled someone she had interviewed that day.

"Quick! Get him on camera!" She cried, turning to the crew.

But there was something cold in the eyes of her coworkers.

"...? What are you dawdling for?! He's saying something over there, but I can't hear a thing. Adjust the mic!" She ordered.

The sound recordist's knees were knocking.

"S-say... Juna? We... we just saw..."

"Saw what?"

"Well, uh... I... in my head... how that girl we saw in the parking lot... died."

Another crew member followed up.

"Umm, actually, we... we saw someone murdering her."

"What are you getting at?"

"...We didn't see the killer's face, but we kind of saw their arms and legs..."

As the crew member hesitated, another voice finished his sentence.

"The serial killer who drove the island of Growerth to terror... is *you*!"

"?!"

Turning at the voice of the stranger, Juna found herself looking at a man carrying a pipe.

In appearance alone he looked like a theater actor, but the man looked deadly calm in spite of the situation. With his free hand he pointed at Juna Riebeluka.

"Who... who are you? What are you talking about?"

So unexpected was the man's accusation that Juna's thoughts were momentarily torn from the great tree and the mysterious man fighting it.

Seeing his chance, the man dressed like a detective declared firmly, as though he were the leading man on the greatest stage of his life.

"I had a detailed look through the entry and exit records for this island's harbors... twenty years' worth of them, not a single day or detail omitted. And I noticed something strange about the records involving ZZZ Network, so I investigated further."

†

One hour earlier.

As he trespassed into the harbor office and checked the passenger lists at unthinkable speeds, Dorrikey stumbled upon something strange.

On the day the second victim was discovered, countless reporters and news teams had visited the island. And on the exit records pertaining to the influx of people, he found the name of a news personnel that was not recorded in any of the entry records.

The exit records had five people from ZZZ Network leaving via ferry. But the crew had been composed of only four people when they entered the island. Dorrikey investigated how the fifth member could have come to the island, but found nothing. The person in question had visited the island several times in the past, he found—and that person had also been on the island when the first victim went missing.

He also found entry records filled out by someone with an incredibly similar handwriting.

Although he had studied some basic handwriting analysis for his work as a detective, Dorrikey was far from an expert in the field. He made a phone call to a friend who could help.

He dialed a certain number. And before the dial tone rang even once, a shrill voice hissed from the receiver.

<Well, if it ain't Dorrikey! What's up? Gettin' into trouble while you're ditching the conference?>

"Good to see that you're as quick on the uptake as ever, QAWSED."

<We're in a bit of an interesting spot ourselves, yanno? The whole gang's rushin' over to the commotion right now. Though it's all brute-forcing here. No place for an Ace Detective, anyhow.>

"It's a good thing I forwent the conference and came here instead, then. Now, I have a request to make of you." Dorrikey said to the mysterious Organization officer whom no one had ever seen in person. "...I want you to look into the employees of ZZZ Network whom I am going to name now. Get me everything you can find."

<Detectives. Talk about backseat driving. Sittin' back not solving anything, and leaving all the legwork to someone else. You gotta have some pride, yanno?> QAWSED snickered. Dorrikey replied with a bitter grin.

"I'd sell my pride to the devil if that were all it took to solve this case."

†

Present time. Western Growerth.

"And to add, Miss Juna Riebeluka—on the days when the women went missing, and were presumably murdered, you must have received spam in your cell phone inbox, as you usually do. But the base station that was used to send the messages to you was located on this very island."

Even as he cast the occasional glance at the black tree and the mayor, the detective continued to plainly explain his hypothesis. Juna averted her eyes and snorted.

"...You're out of your mind. Are you telling me that you somehow recorded the relay stations for each and every message and phone number? That's not an easy record to access in the first place."

"There are those in this world who can, in fact, easily investigate such information. Even if the telephone companies don't, someone might have recorded—no, remembered them all." The detective muttered to himself solemnly.

And before anyone knew it, a girl was standing beside him. A silver-haired girl with an inscrutable expression. Although she looked familiar to the crew somehow, their memories were too hazy to draw from.

The girl went up to the detective and tugged on his sleeve without a word.

"Hm? Ah, Watson! Thank goodness you're safe!" The detective exclaimed in delight. But instead of celebrating their reunion, the girl called Watson mumbled,

"...I smell blood from her."

She stared expressionlessly at Juna.

"Impossible! I couldn't have gotten blood on myself!"

"How can you be so sure? It's an interesting expression you used just now. For all you know, you could have cut yourself without noticing, or maybe someone's blood splashed onto your back while you were unconscious. I'm afraid that I just can't shake the feeling that somewhere deep down, you were certain that you took care not to get any blood on yourself."

The detective's hypothesis was exactly that—a hypothesis.

But the confidence backing up his voice was enough to shake Juna.

"The police will catch on soon enough. Or perhaps they're already suspicious of you, and are searching for evidence. But it's also true that they haven't set a tail on you yet—and that is why I came to stop you before you could claim your fourth victim."

Then, he added solemnly,

"Although... I suppose I'm already too late."

As the detective shook his head mournfully, the other crew members stared dubiously at Juna.

"You can't possibly believe what this guy's—" She began, astonished, but the others replied,

"I'm sorry, Juna... but... we... we saw it."

"What are you talking about?" She asked, empty laughter escaping her lips. One of the crew members, unable to take any more, finally burst out,

"We saw your leg stepping on that weird machine and carving out that girl's heart, Juna!"

"..."

Silence.

In the world filled with the sound of bats and their flapping wings, the humans were overcome by stillness.

Seconds passed. Juna wiped her face clear of all expression.

"All right. I don't get everything, but I guess the cat's out of the bag. I'm the killer." She said nonchalantly. The crew members exchanged glances, and the cameraman silently turned his lens to Juna.

Several more seconds passed in silence. Then, a hint of a grin rose to Juna's confident face.

"And so what?"

"Wha—"

"Look. Look at what's in front of us. Logic itself is falling to bits—no. We're destroying logic with our own hands. This is no time to be debating whether killing is right or wrong. Forget morality—it's not going to help us now!"

Juna enunciated clearly, her voice carrying even through the chatter of the bats.

That was how the other crew members knew—judging from their experience on the field, they could see: that the woman before them was in her right mind, and that something had merely been twisted in her heart.

That was how they could tell that she must have been the serial killer.

Whether the crew members trembled or not at the reality of their superior's identity and the juxtaposed fantasy unfolding before them, the detective sighed and took a step toward Juna.

"In any case, this place is dangerous. Allow me to escort you to the nearest police station, Mi-"

There was a gunshot. A black hole was left in the detective's head.

"Don't get in my way. This might be my last chance to meet him."

"Wha... Whaaaaaaa?!"

The crew members screamed in two stages.

The first time, reacting to the man being shot right in front of their eyes.

The second time, reacting to the chilling sight of the man's head transforming into a flock of numerous bats and reforming.

"...! What are you?!"

"Because I am just like those beings over there causing the commotion, things like lead bullets logically do not work against me. I'm sure some legwork and observation might get you some more information."

Rolling up a crumpled bullet in his hand, the vampire again drew closer to Juna.

But a complicated expression rose to her face as she mumbled,

"Why... couldn't you have been *him*?"

"?"

"What is wrong with this island?! I... I was so sure he'd come to see me... I could finally meet those who weren't human... but why?! Why not me?!"

"I don't really understand what you're trying to say, but I'll have to put you under mild subjugation for now. I'll have you added into turning yourself in to the pol-"

At that point, they were assaulted by a terrible gust of wind.

"?!"

There was an explosive impact as the crew and the detective were flung off their feet. Something must have happened between the black tree and the man resembling the mayor; the screeching of bats and powerful crashes rocked the darkness.

And Juna noticed something.

That the countless arms branching from the tree were lunging straight for her.

And that the silhouette resembling the mayor was fighting against them, defending her.

†

In the darkness.

'Father, how can I become like you?'

Through the violent currents bobbed up memories of when he had asked such a question of his father.

He had wondered how his father could always stay calm and composed.

Although Relic was not at leisure to wonder why such a thought came to him at such a time, his father's words rose up to the surface in the midst of his fury and despair.

[It is a simple matter. All you have to do is set up a table, a chair, and a tea set in your heart.]

'I can't do it, Father—'

A frail voice echoed from within him.

Though Relic had left his entire being to his endless outrage, somewhere in his heart he thought of his normal self complaining to his father.

A table, a chair, and a tea set.

Perhaps they had, at one point, been set up in his heart.

But the one who should have been sitting across that table was gone.

A wave of grief flooded in, crushing his heart.

[Eighty percent of the world's problems would be solved if every human being on earth became like gentlemen.]

'I can't—'

[Of course, those who subscribe to certain lines of thinking also choose to enter conflict because of their gentleman status. That is a difficult matter indeed, but a true gentleman must accept all situations at hand and smile.]

'I can't become like you—'

[Do you not think so, Relic?]

'I can't do it, Father—'

Relic coldly rejected the voice coming from the depths of his sense of reason.

'I want to kill her so much it's driving me insane.'

'I'll kill that woman who murdered Hilda!'

He had already found out, after all, from the humans' conversation outside.

His bats had a clear view of all 360 degrees around him.

And in one part of that field of vision was the bespectacled woman who killed Hilda.

Relic's hazy bloodlust began converging onto a single human being.

It didn't matter to him who the woman was or why she killed Hilda.

It didn't even occur to him to make her die slowly and painfully.

He had to erase her presence from the world as soon as possible.

Relic did not know just what kind of form he was in.

All he did was unleash his power as his emotions—or his instincts—desired.

But a second before his power reached the woman, he was stopped.

There stood a dhampyr in human form, who looked much smaller than usual.

The man who had punched him in the face earlier that day had returned with a completely different look.

With an anxious yet defiant sneer, the man who had chosen to fight of his own will stood there, ready to take on whatever came his way.

Watt Stalf.

The man Relic had always thought furthest from a gentleman—

For a split second in Relic's head, the image of Watt overlapped with that of the viscount.

Watt was standing there, not as a vampire, a dhampyr, or a human—

But as a mayor defending his city.

†

Numerous jaws materialized around Watt and tore away the countless arms shooting toward the reporter.

There was a massive flock of bats surrounding Watt, and all sorts of things emerged from them as though the flock was a gate.

But the flock of bats were not coming from his own body.

They were emerging from the island itself, transforming into different objects.

Just like when Watt first appeared, the bats turned back into scrapped vehicles and flew into the great black tree.

But the tree was already collapsing by that point.

The tower that seemed to reach into the heavens was now about the height of a fifty-story building. Its countless hands had converged into a pair of massive arms, and the tree was turning into a pitch-black giant.

A giant composed of bats and fog.

There was nothing of Relic in its appearance. In its face, two blue lights shone hazily in place of its eyes.

"So is that your idea of being more agile? If you wanna intimidate me, you're gonna have to try harder than that. Try Godzilla or a giant octopus monster."

Whether it heard Watt's provocation or not, the giant raised its hand—large enough to crush a house in its fist—and slammed it down at him faster than anything it had done before.

But a set of wolf jaws—also large enough to crush a house—emerged from the ground and caught the arm, tearing it apart and scattering it into a flock of bats.

"How 'bout I cool your head?" Watt shrugged, and a new flock of bats emerged behind him.

The vast flock charged at the giant, flying overhead.

Then, it transformed into a massive quantity of water and swept over the giant.

Watt must have transformed river water from the island into those bats—as the water fell everywhere, the giant slowly leaned back and shook the island with something like a pained groan.

Watt sneered.

"Whoops. My bad. Completely forgot you couldn't stand flowing water."

†

Mirald, who was watching out of range of his telepathy, sounded genuinely impressed.

"Incredible... who is that man?"

Dorrikey, who had been flung away, struggled to his feet with Watson and also exclaimed at the sight.

"If both those powers were produced by Melhilm... does that mean that the Organization has done the equivalent of unleashing nuclear weapons on the world?"

"..."

A slight distance away, Pamela quietly listened to the sounds of battle with her eyes still covered.

What was her heart set on? Her sealed lips showed no sign of revealing her thoughts.

†

"Hey... aren't those Relic's powers?"

The vampires of the castle gaped incredulously at Watt's battle.

As one of the freeloaders commented, the others nodded.

"I'd heard he got stronger... but isn't this cheating?"

"It looks like he's even stronger than Relic..."

"What do we do now? Rethink our loyalties or something?"

As the freeloaders whispered amongst themselves, the jester twirled through the air with her eyes alight.

"Wow! Wow wow wow wow wow! Master Watt's gotten so strong! What's going on? What? Did he train under a vampire sage? Did he get modified by vampire aliens? Did he get bitten by a vampire zombie? Or did some secret vampire society experiment on him?!"

Although Relic was the experiment of the vampire Organization, Pirie set that aside and rejoiced at Watt's power.

The maids of Waldstein Castle also looked on in shock, as though Watt would overpower Relic—

But one cold voice shattered the moment of expectant awe.

"Is that bastard planning to die over there?"

The vampires turned at the icy voice. There stood Shizune, twirling a fork with her eyes as cold as her tone.

"What do you know, you stupid Eater?! Why would Master Watt die?! I mean, I'm worried about Relic, but Master Watt would never even think about dying!" The jester complained. Shizune gave a wry chuckle.

"You think he can use all that power for free?"

"What...?"

"I don't know how, but the idiot up there's somehow got his hands on Relic's powers. But that's like putting an F1 engine in your grandmother's car. He's going to break any second now. I wouldn't be surprised if he burst right into ash."

There was a mysterious solemnity in Shizune's claim. She did not seem to be joking.

"He's probably in pain. Fighting with his entire body falling apart."

"Master Watt..."

The jester turned in horror.

As if on cue, she spotted Watt finally kneeling before the giant.

†

"Shit... I mighta drank too much. Teach me to never get tanked at work again."

Watt forced himself to grin as he knelt, masking the agony running through his body.

Naturally, he was completely sober, and he was not kneeling because he was drunk.

It felt as though his entire body was made of nuts and bolts.

Every last joint, every last blood vessel, and every last nerve creaked in his body like ill-fitting machinery rebelling against the brain.

And yet he did not cry out, holding back the pain as he got to his feet.

A terrible chill ran down his spine and threatened to overcome him.

His brain was on the verge of popping like a balloon.

He felt sick to his stomach, like even his heart and lungs were coming up to his throat.

And yet Watt sneered, looking down on his foe.

"Looks like you have no idea why you're losing."

<...>

Relic also came to a stop.

His body was smaller than before, indicating that Watt's attacks had not left him unscathed.

"You're probably never used all that power you got... but I made the effort to practice the damn thing. I *studied* it. Though tuition was goddamned expensive."

Hiding the cost of knowledge—his agony—Watt continued.

"Sure, you're an F1 driver. But you ain't winning any races if you don't even know how to step on the gas."

His provocations were little more than a ploy to buy time.

But Watt had never wielded his powers on such a scale before—rather than recovering, his pain and nausea worsened.

He tasted blood rising to his mouth. He didn't know if it was coming from his lungs or his stomach, but he forced it back down his esophagus.

Even the fear that his dhampyr self might be forcibly divided into vampire and human halves, he swallowed. He prepared to attack—

But the giant was faster.

'*Shit.*'

He swore in his head, but Watt Stalf did not give up.

He transformed his aching body into a flock of bats to avoid the attack.

But a second before he moved, a colorful fog emerged in the air and clung to the eyes of the giant's blue eyes.

"...Clown?"

Ignoring the frowning Watt, the giant swung its arms to shake off the fog.

As the jester expertly avoided the swipes, her voice fell from overhead.

"Oh, Master Watt! All that prattling's exactly why everyone calls you a petty villain! It's like bragging makes you seem stronger! It's just like you to ignore your enemy!"

Irritated at the jester's distractions, countless jet-black wolves emerged from Relic's body and rushed straight for Watt.

But they were quickly repelled by an invisible force.

"...?!"

He turned. There was a familiar green-haired boy standing next to him.

"What are you doing, Mr. Watt?"

Val had only just arrived; he had not seen all the things Watt had done.

Not knowing what was going on, Val was using his invisible power to try and hold back Relic.

"Dumbass... Clown! Val! You two stay out of this!"

"*You're* the passing stranger who should be butting out."

Shizune leapt in, grabbed Watt by the collar, and jumped away.

A third arm that had emerged from the giant's shoulder rammed into where Watt was standing only moments ago.

"Shizune, you bitch..."

"You think I'd let you die like a hero protecting the island?" She spat, uninterested in flattery.

And as though speaking for her enmity toward Watt, as soon as she landed, she threw him against the pavement.

"Urgh! Y-you bitch..."

Watt got to his feet, his mouth twitching. At the end of his gaze he could see the maids in green, moving in teams of four to try and stop the giant's advance.

When they spun around the giant's limbs, they created a vicious whirlwind that tore at its arms and legs.

The giant regenerated almost instantly, but the maids continued to dance in a battle of attrition, refusing to stop.

"Those maids aren't any smarter than you. Looks like they want to prevent Relic from becoming a murderer, no matter what."

"What?"

"I'm talking about you. You're half-human—they want to save you from Relic. Heh. So does that mean they wouldn't care about you if you were a full vampire?" Shizune snickered.

At the same time, the freeloaders stumbled and transformed into bats to distract the giant, while others chucked rocks at it.

"One of 'em's gone downtown to call the werewolves. Job—the old werewolf—is going to be here any minute now. and once that Doctor and Professor get here, they might figure out a way to calm Relic down somehow." Shizune explained quietly. Watt opened his mouth.

"...Castle's still full of fucking goody-two-shoes."

"What, are you going to shoo them away now?"

"As if. I'll use 'em for all they're worth."

The mayor snickered, sounding enthused.

His pain was subsiding somewhat—Watt prepared to set off again and made a declaration.

"After all... One day, I'm gonna make 'em all mine."

†

In the darkness.

'How strange.'

Another emotion forced itself into the current of hatred.

Familiar faces were fighting to try and stop him.

'I thought I didn't have any hope anymore.'

'This was supposed to be rock bottom. There shouldn't have been anything sadder.'

The jester, Val, the maids, and the freeloaders came up to face him, one after another.

'Stop. I'm not worth all that effort.'

Though he thought he should stop his attacks, the hatred that had fused with his power drowned Relic's few clear thoughts in a flood of rage.

'Stop. I... I don't want to destroy even—'

His desire to destroy everything came face-to-face with a contradiction. The currents around Relic stumbled for a single moment.

'Please, stop. Even if you fight me—'

Reflected in Relic's eyes, which were now part of the giant, was the face of the female reporter. The killer who took Hilda's life, fleeing from the scene with a hand on her arm.

'—I can't stop myself from killing her!'

His anger exploded in an instant, creating a single ultimate attack.

Shaking away Pirie's fog.

Deflecting Val's telekinesis.

Ignoring the maids' assault.

Flinging aside the freeloaders.

Passing by the detached Shizune.

A black spear swept forth, aimed directly at the heart of Relic's target.

The tip of the spear, composed of an incredibly dense mass of bats and fog, cut through the island's air as it headed for the woman's chest.

But Relic's despair incarnate—his ultimate attack—

Was once again stopped by one man.

Watt Stalf.

He stood confidently between Relic and the reporter, facing down the black spear.

Creating the largest flock of bats yet, he arranged them before himself and used them as a wall.

The bats converged like holograms, turning into a powerfully dense shield, blocking the way of the spear.

A spear and a shield made in the very same way. The famous paradox forgotten, every onlooker gulped at the fatal clash.

A powerful impact shook western Growerth.

†

"Getting angry feels good, doesn't it?"

The mayor's voice.

The mayor was badly injured, his stomach run through by the spear.

His power was not enough to stop Relic's attack.

So he used his own body as the final layer of defense. The spear had been stopped.

He was overwhelmed by excruciating pain—the price of using the same power as Relic.

But without letting his agony show, the mayor approached Relic, step by step.

"Getting angry's a pain in the ass, but when you use that anger to destroy things... nothing feels better..."

Though now completely still, Relic was still a gigantic silhouette composed of bats. Black fog was swirling at his feet.

But his violent energy from before was gone. Watt shrugged and continued condescendingly.

"I got the gist of things from what those humans and the detective were talking about. ...So what the fuck were you trying to do? In your state, you wouldn't have stopped at killing just the culprit. You could've destroyed the entire island... and I know that you know you might have gone further."

The giant neither moved nor answered. But Watt continued to speak, assuming that his voice reached Relic.

"Or what? 'I weally weally hate the person who killed Hilda, but one person won't do, so I'm gonna kill evewy person in the world. I'mma massacre six billion', is that it? Although that's a pretty entertaining way of thinking. Reminds me exactly of Shizune when I first met her."

"...Maybe I should just kill him now." Shizune muttered, deadpan. The freeloaders trembled silently in fear.

It seemed that the giant would remain silent in the face of Watt's provocations. But—

<No...>

A voice echoed from the giant, a slight hint of Relic audible inside.

Strangely enough, it sounded similar to how the vampire called Pamela had used her cube of bats as a speaker.

<Why... are you getting in my way.>

The voice did not carry the gentle tone Relic always used. But his sense of reason was clearly present. The residents of Waldstein Castle placed their hopes on that presence, and Watt withdrew his sneer.

"Let me ask *you* a question. Why would I *not* get in your way?"

<You're the one... who told me to learn anger...>

"I am. But you thought I'd take your side when you got angry? How spoiled can you get? I don't care if you're just a sheltered little prince or a revenge-obsessed lunatic. If you get in my way, I'll beat you to death until you kick the fucking bucket. Simple as that."

"That's awful." "Worse than the Devil." The freeloaders reacted to Watt's condescending threats.

Hearing them, the mayor clicked his tongue.

"As if that was a surprise, shitheads."

"And FYI, Master Watt's also a liar, a rulebender, and an irresponsible villain! Don't trust—gah!"

Landing a throat thrust on the jovial jester, Watt exhaled and looked up at the black silhouette.

"You think I'd take responsibility for anything other than a public promise?"

Relic paused. Then came his resentful voice.

<You're the one... who's getting in my way.>

"Say that again?"

<I... want to avenge... no. I'll be honest. I'm not trying to avenge Hilda. She didn't want this. But I... I'm doing this for myself... I want to kill that woman. Whatever happened earlier doesn't matter... I just want to kill her. So... get out of my way!>

"As if, you little shit. Don't underestimate me." Watt shot back, grumbling about how sheltered Relic was. "But you're right. The death sentence doesn't exist in Germany, so if that woman is judged by humans, your revenge ain't going to happen. But I'm not gonna let you kill her."

<Why not?!>

"She's a human, and I'm a mayor over humans. Obviously, I have to judge her by human laws."

The onlooking vampires were the most shocked by Watt's statement.

They had always thought of Watt as someone who abused his privileges as a vampire, claiming that human values did not apply to vampires. Val, Shizune, the freeloaders, and even the maids were floored. The jester alone looked on excitedly.

<How does that help you?! What do you get from putting your life on the line to protect a ruthless killer?!>

Relic's question was understandable—but Watt's answer was unexpected.

"The people of this island... they'll have peace of mind."

He answered all too easily.

Watt continued, as though reciting common sense.

"Let's say you crush that woman so hard that no one would believe a human could have done it. Would *anybody* believe it if we said, 'The reporter, who was the fifth victim, was actually the killer'? Would *anybody* believe that the killer was gone? Would *anybody* believe that there wasn't some godforsaken monster on the loose?"

<...>

As Relic stood in silence, Watt's tone grew firm. As though scolding Relic for interfering in the world of humans as a vampire.

"The first victim had a little sister—a tiny thing about this tall. When I went in for an official visit, she was shaking in her boots. She asked me, 'are you going to catch the bad guy?'. As a vampire, I'd have told the brat to go look for the killer herself if she had time to be sobbing at home. But I was there as the mayor. So I made a promise with the damned kid. I told her we'd catch the killer no matter what."

Noticing that he was getting emotional, Watt lowered his tone.

"I told you before. I keep public promises. If I had to choose between you getting your revenge, and peace of mind for everyone on this island... I'd obviously choose the latter."

In contrast, Relic raised his voice.

<That's all...? You'd give your *life* for something that insignificant?!>

"Don't make me laugh, dipshit." Watt growled. "You think I just put my life on the line? Don't flatter yourself. Facing a bratty tantrum's nothing compared to putting in extra hours overnight at City Hall."

This time, Relic was silent for longer.

Then, the giant collapsed into the form of an orb.

And everyone saw—in the center of the orb, which was composed of fewer bats, was Relic in human form.

But his usual gentleness was nowhere to be seen. Relic's eyes shone an eerie blue as he directed his fury at Watt.

<Then... just try. And stop me.>

"..."

<I'm. Going to kill. That woman. With all my strength. Again and again. Just try. And stop me.>

His voice was dripping with intense resolve.

The jester, Val, and the maids tried to speak. But Watt Stalf gestured for silence—

And made one unbelievable correction.

"You mean, 'Help, Mr. Stalf. I don't know what to do, so please stop me'. You're not as honest as your old man, I see. That's why that girl floating in the middle of that maelstrom ended up dyin' on you."

It was as though the air itself had frozen.

Watt had so easily broken an unspoken taboo.

But before anyone could wonder what he was thinking, the fog and the bats around Relic converged at once. Power squirmed in dizzying density as his body was once more swallowed by a black current.

But that was for but a second—Relic drew the current into himself.

It was different from the giant—Relic had compressed all the power wielded by the giant into his own body.

Without even trying to hide the mass, reminiscent of a black hole, Relic von Waldstein lunged at Watt with a silent scream.

It was as though everything he touched was being erased. The air around Relic turned to black fog, then to bats as they trailed after him.

Perhaps Watt would simply be disintegrated by the force, the vampires feared, but the mayor's actions were extraordinarily simple.

He raised his right hand and cracked a grin, pointing at something behind Relic.

'...?'

For a second, Relic had no idea what Watt was pointing at—

But the moment an answer occurred to him, he stopped in his tracks and turned in panic.

Watt's finger was pointed at Hilda's body, floating in the center of the black maelstrom.

And around her unmoving body was a flock of bats that Relic did not recognize.

'It can't be...'

The bats' transformation came undone as they returned to the form they had before Watt subjugated them.

A pile of steel beams the size of utility poles, picked up from a construction site.

'NO!'

The beams were dragged to the ground by gravity. Under them was Hilda's body, a gaping hole in her chest.

Because she was a corpse, he had thought that all hope was lost.

Yet Relic turned to try and protect Hilda—

And saw the beams transform back into a flock of bats.

'...What?!'

In Relic's confusion, the bats flew off into the distance—

"Good night, little princeling."

And with Watt's voice, a powerful attack struck Relic's relieved back.

†

When Relic opened his eyes, he saw the faces of the maids.

"Thank goodness you're awake, Master Relic."

"Everyone..."

The maids looked so very kind. Relic only wished that the circumstances behind their smiles were different.

But what happened earlier could not have been a dream. The sight of Hilda's body and the voice of the sobbing jester told him that his despair was still very real.

But unlike before, his body would not move easily. It would be some time before he could even turn into a flock of bats.

Was it a side-effect of using such enormous power? Or had something been done to him to suppress his abilities?

"Uh... how long was I out?"

"Only a few minutes, Master Relic."

"I see..."

With the maids' help, Relic slowly sat up.

At a slight distance, he could see the mayor.

Watt seemed to have nothing to say. With a disinterested glance at Relic, he turned to the church. He must have turned it back to normal—their surroundings were exactly as they were before Relic's rampage.

Relic mouthed silently for a moment, but finally decided on a stance and spoke to the mayor.

"I guess... I couldn't be like Father after all."

"Who says you need to be like that idiot?"

"I... I can't forgive the murderer after all."

Though his rampage was stopped, none of Relic's hatred had been assuaged. Only his despair was eased somewhat, thanks to the vampires around him.

He was ready to face Watt's reproach, or perhaps even an attempt at murder. But—

"So what?"

"Huh?"

Not only Relic, but all those around him gaped at Watt's nonchalance.

"It's only a matter of time before the murderer's arrested. Once her trial ends, the people here will have peace of mind. After that, you're free to turn to fog or something and do whatever you want with her in prison. That's not my jurisdiction, so I don't care what happens."

"Aren't you usually supposed to try and *stop* him from taking revenge?" Shizune asked, baffled. Watt snickered.

"What's the point in forcing human values a couple decades old on an oh-so-mighty vampire?" He replied easily.

"That's... that's not what he said earlier." "He really does bend every rule when he's wearing those shades." The freeloaders whispered amongst themselves.

Relic gaped silently, unable to follow the flow of the conversation.

In the midst of all that—

"Hilda... why won't you wake up?"

One girl asked an innocent yet cruel question.

The girl Hilda had called Watson was standing there.

'...Oh. I see. This girl probably doesn't understand what it means for a human to die.' Relic thought, remembering his own reaction just earlier.

"Hey, Watson. You see, Hilda is human. That means..."

He could not bring himself to continue. But the girl tilted her head, sniffed, and replied,

"...But she's a vampire now."

" " " " " ?" " ?" " ?" " ?" " ?"

Everyone froze.

Ignoring them, Watson sniffed again.

"Her heart. I smell it. So close." She said plainly.

"Hey. What just happened over there?"

"Dunno. Oh, looks like the TV crew's run off. Shouldn't we confiscate their camera?"

Two of the freeloaders, who had not heard Watson, turned to where the TV crew had been.

"That camera must've been expensive. Let's delete the data and sell the thing."

"Like a damned thief. I like it."

They greedily searched for the camera, but did not find it anywhere.

"Huh. Guess the camera guy's got one heck of a journalist spirit."

"That ain't good. We'd better tell Mr. Watt."

With that, they turned to Watt, Relic, and the others—

"Hey."

—and spotted the cameraman, filming the bewildered residents of Waldstein Castle.

At the same time, Relic also noticed the cameraman who was filming him.

So shocking was the scene that someone was about to speak up—but Watson spoke up first, pointing at the camera bag by the man's foot.

"Hilda's heart. Probably there."

The vampires froze again.

At that point, the cameraman, who had been shooting the vampires without a single proper light, finally opened his mouth.

"Hm? Ah, so you've got me. Incredible, really. From your silver hair, I suppose you must be connected to the Silver Wolves that serve the Shreemeice Clan. But seeing as you are acting alone, you must be a distant relative, nothing more."

Even Watt was silent at the cameraman's sudden turn for the talkative.

"Excellent expressions, all of you. Very natural."

Then, the man finally turned off the camera, slowly lowered it, and revealed his face.

He was probably in his late twenties or early thirties. There were prominent shadows under his eyes.

"Cameras are wonderful. Don't you agree? Even if you are a vampire filming a human, a camera lets you break out of that simple frame and give you a truly objective view."

The man had a pale complexion. In human terms, he was so pale that he looked ill. But there was nothing resembling a patient in his expression, and an unusually long set of canines flashed between his smile. And other than the shadows under his eyes, his face was quite attractive.

'A vampire!'

Just as everyone came to the same conclusion, a man dressed like a detective appeared out of nowhere and grumbled to the cameraman.

"I thought the accomplice would have run off with the culprit." He said disdainfully, revealing the man's identity to the world. "Now... Dimguil Sunford. One of my friends from the Organization looked into you while he was doing some legwork for me. To think that there was a killer *and* a Clan member in one small TV crew."

The maids, one of the freeloaders, and Shizune reacted to the name.

"My goodness. The Organization's vampires really have ears everywhere. But I have to correct you on one note. I was no accomplice. Juna has no idea about me, and I only added a few superhuman details to her killings so I could capture her snowballing actions on camera."

"Like blocking a well with a boulder?"

"I do admit that was a little crude of me. I didn't have much time to think of something then."

With a wry chuckle, the man called Dimguil put down his camera and applauded warmly.

"But really, thank you for that wonderful show. The lighting wasn't good enough for a proper picture, but it'll stay a good memory in my head. At first, I came to see that fascinating beast called 'Relic'. But the mayor's heroics were something else. A true myth for the ages."

'Sunford?'

'Hilda's... a vampire?'

'Her heart's in that bag?'

'What's he saying?'

"'Fascinating beast'. Is he talking about me?'

'Am I dreaming after all?'

Relic was confused.

Why was everyone quietly listening to the man?

As his emotions grew calmer, the answer came naturally to him.

The man exuded a sense of danger.

The vampire named Dimguil, who was casually rambling in front of him, was dangerous.

Relic did not know why, but it felt as though he were leaning from a cliff without a single lifeline. Even though the man was talking in front of him, Relic felt as though Dimguil was driving a stake into his back.

But in spite of the aura he cast, Dimguil spoke rather jovially.

"In exchange for the footage... yes. Let me return one of your citizens."

He raised the camera bag with telekinesis, and transformed it into a flock of bats above his hand. Relic thought he glimpsed a dark red mass between the scattering bats, and tried to stand. But unable to use his own strength, he had to receive help from a maid.

The man continued to smile kindly at Relic as he said,

"Although you can't call her human anymore."

The dark red mass turned into a single bat and flew freely into the air.

As Relic's gaze locked onto the bat, Dimguil turned to leave.

"Hold it, asshole. I'm not letting you get away with aiding the culprit."

"I'm afraid I will. After all, the only legitimate part of my human record is my name. In other words, I don't exist as a human. Our Clan dislikes coming in contact with human culture, so when I want to go incognito, I have to prepare all the paperwork myself. It really is bothersome. Our head could try to be more open-minded." Dimguil complained as he turned. But Watt took a step forward, his temple twitching.

"In other words, I can beat your vampire ass to death. Simple enough."

Watt also was clearly aware of how dangerous Dimguil was. But if he were planning to back off, he would have done so from the beginning.

"I'm afraid that is not a good idea. The two of you are indeed the strongest vampires in the world, but not all matchups are dependent on power alone. I'm only the strongest member of the Sunford Clan, and far from being the strongest in the world... but I believe I'll be able to defeat you two with my *abilities*."

"All right, bring—urgh...? Grk...!"

Watt was interrupted mid-lunge by an arm piercing through his chest.

"Too bad. Looks like you've stashed your heart somewhere else again." Shizune remarked nonchalantly. Watt struggled to turn his head.

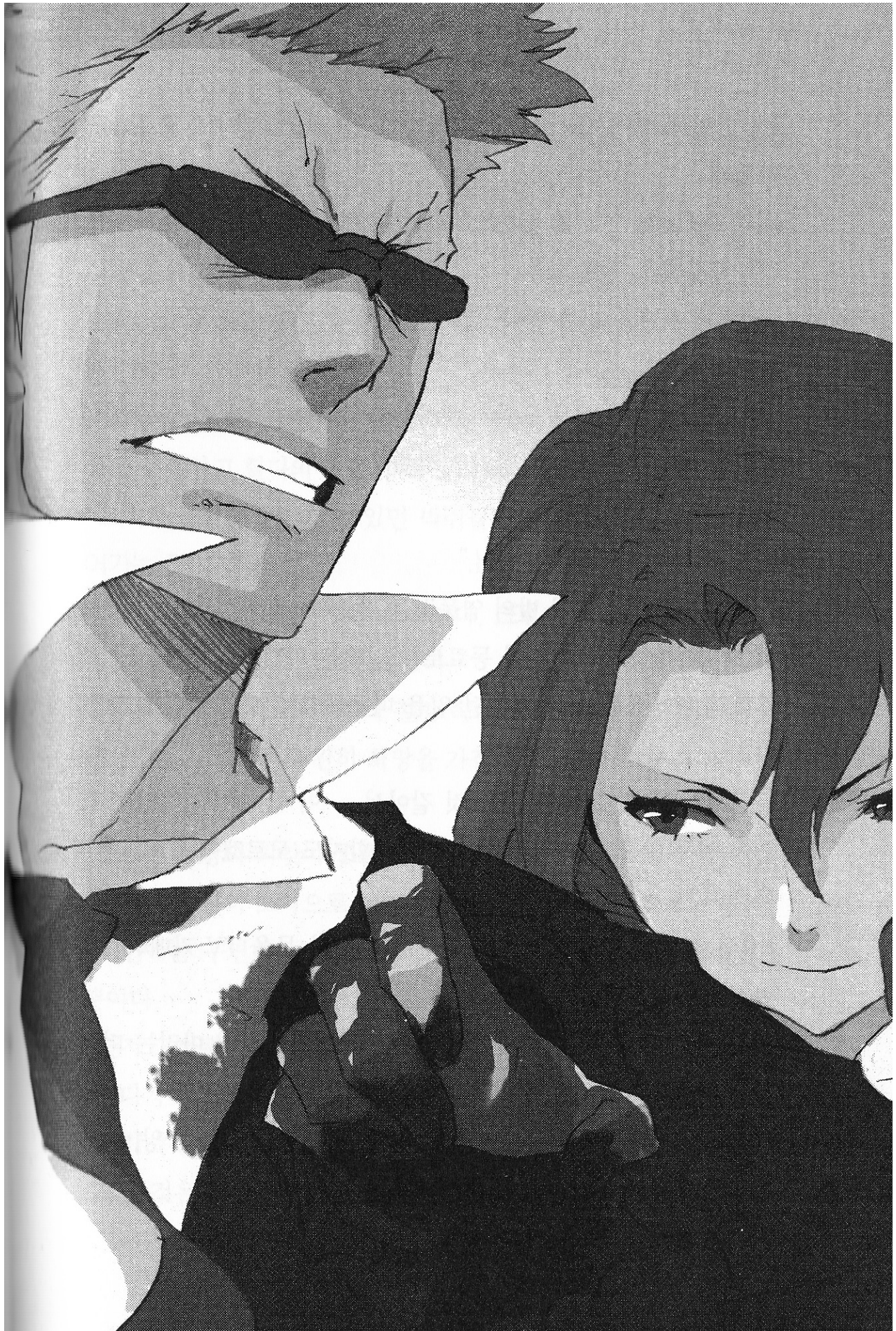
"...Shizune... you bitch..."

"I told you not to get yourself killed like an idiot. Don't you have any brains?"

Watt seemed to have reached his limit. He collapsed on the spot. The jester rushed over and shook his prone body while pounding on Shizune's legs, but Shizune ignored her and glared at Dimguil.

"Excellent choice, young lady. You saved his life. ...But if you'd fought alongside him, I suppose I might have been the one in danger."

Dimguil did not seem to be humbly flattering her, but Shizune did not regret her decision in the least. She shot him an icy stare.



"I doubt it. I'd never have fought alongside this bastard anyway. And I'd rather off him properly myself than leave the job to your powers."

"...Aha. So you're the Eater who ate Pamela. I never suspected that the Eater would be such a beautiful young woman. I was expecting someone a bit more feral. But in any case, Pamela may pay you a visit one day to repay you. Please be sure to say hello."

"Tell her to taste even better next time."

"I will." Dimguil chuckled as he turned. But just before he left, he raised his hand into the air.

No one knew what he was doing. But suddenly, Val, standing beside Relic, paled and began to tremble.

"Val?"

"He... he just cut my power."

Though Val was one with Growerth itself, Dimguil had cut his telekinesis. Relic first doubted the possibility, but remembered how the girl named Pamela had cut Pirie while she was still in fog form. A chill ran down his spine.

"Excuse me. It looks like she'll be coming to get me. ...This island really is full of the most curious beasts. I might pay an official visit someday. Well, *adios, amigos!*"

With a strangely cheerful goodbye, Dimguil transformed himself and his camera into a flock of bats.

Shizune lobbed a fork at one of them, but the target divided itself into a flock of even smaller bats and avoided the attack.

And as though ignoring the attack outright, Dimguil lazily flew over the starry sea.

But Relic was in no state to watch Dimguil depart.

His claim that he would 'return one of the citizens' and the dark red mass amidst the bats. The two facts tugged at his thoughts.

Don't have hope, whispered the remnants of his despair.

But Relic put all his strength into his body, ignoring the throbbing pain as he ran to Hilda's body.

Then, a bat that had been flying through the air was suddenly sucked into Hilda's chest.

Don't have hope. This is a trap, the voice whispered, but it did not reach Relic.

No matter how many times he was betrayed, and no matter how many times he was flung into despair, Relic would always have hope for Hilda.

The seeds of hope bore fruit.

But Relic had not brought forth hope with his own efforts.

This time, the roulette simply happened to have stopped on the side of hope. Nothing more.

Hilda slowly opening her eyes and dazedly looking around—

Mumbling Relic's name in a nearly inaudible voice—

It was all thanks to a stroke of good fortune. Relic had not created a miracle.

But none of that mattered to him anymore.

A pair of slightly long canines glinted between her lips, but to Relic von Waldstein, that was but meaningless trivia.

"Relic, what just—"

As Hilda whispered nervously, Relic drew her into a tight embrace.

"Hilda... Hilda..."

"Oh... what's wrong, Relic?"

"I'm so glad... I'm sorry... I'm so sorry, Hilda..."

As Relic apologized and rejoiced at the same time, Hilda seemed confused for a moment. But—

"Hah hah. Oh, Relic."

Hilda smiled.

And, losing himself to joy, Relic once more lost consciousness.

With Hilda wrapped in his arms, and tears streaming endlessly down his face.

†

"Oh! Master Watt? Master Watt?"

"Stop that. I told you, I'm not your master anymore."

Though he had roared in search of Shizune when he first opened his eyes, Watt had turned his irritated steps to City Hall when he heard that she had long since fled.

The jester talked affectionately behind him.

"The murderer got away in the end, didn't she? Is that okay? Is that okay? You know, you know? She might just give up and go around killing everyone! She might! Then you'll really never be able to face Relic—no, the viscount!"

"That's nothing for you to worry over. Me and the detective's already got it taken care of."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

The jester tilted her head as she floated upside-down. Watt grinned menacingly.

"As if I'd tell a Waldstein flunky."

"Whaaaaat?! Wh-whatever! Shrimpy Watt! Watt Shrimpy! ...Oh! You know, you know? Aren't there a lot of TV crews on the island right now? If any of them shot the fight just now, won't there be a big mess?"

The jester's second worry was a grave one, but Watt shook his head dismissively.

"...That's probably not an issue. They might've gotten the pillar, but no one's gonna make sense of that.

"And besides, every news team on the island's probably rooted at City Hall right about now."

"?"

†

City Hall.

"Huh. The tremors've stopped. I guess they must have been doing construction underground after all."

"Hm? Right, right. But back to work, now. Keep your eyes on the rooftop. The moment of truth might be here any second now."

Though it was the middle of the night, the press was camped out in front of the city hall building, their cameras focused on the rooftop.

Spotlights were pointing at the edge of the roof, and a detachment of police officers had lights trained on a man announcing something from there.

"But really... why such a loud suicide attempt in the middle of the night?"

"Forget that. What's that Japanese guy shouting about?"

While the reporters on the ground complained, Mage stood on the edge of the rooftop as he rambled to the police and the news crews in Japanese.

"The tremors shaking this island are a sign of the wrath of the daidarabotchi! The alignment of the planets will bring forth Amaterathotep from the Ibusuki UFO! Ambrose will invade for a piercing through the center of the earth! It begins this day! Rejoice! Rejoice!"

'Aaaaaaargh... This is embarrassing... I can't take it anymore!'

"Sneak into City Hall and keep the press occupied. Right. A suicide attempt might be just the thing."

Mage was half-threatened into his position atop the city hall building. He was forced to cry out in jumbled Japanese and make a show of trying to take his own life.

The press, assuming that he might have something to do with the serial killings, swarmed to the building to capture the moment the man either fell or was rescued.

'How much longer do I have to do this, Mr. Stalf? Watt Stalf?!'

'When I take power... I'll make sure you taste this humiliatioooooooooon!'

Mage's internal monologue reached no one's ears, and night on Growerth passed quietly(?) without incident.

The so-called earthquake and the momentary disappearance of the stars had worried the islanders, but the suicide attempt took the majority of the attention. By morning, not many people were worried.

And by afternoon, even the suicide attempt was forgotten in the wake of the news that the serial killer had been arrested.

In any event, peaceful days returned to the island, and the people found peace of mind in the capture of the murderer.

Not knowing about the peril that came and went in its shadow, the people of Growerth returned to daily life—

—believing in the warm smile of the mayor of Neuberg, who knew no greater joy.

Epilogue: The Storyteller Doth Depart!

Juna Riebeluka was lost deep in the woods.

She could not return to the city. The police must be on the lookout for her by now.

But if, perhaps, she wandered through the forest, a miracle would occur once more.

After all, she had proven the existence of vampires today.

She thought to herself. How had things come to this?

Tears of frustration slid down her face. What was she missing? Why wouldn't 'he' appear before her?"

"..."

And she reminisced. Countless times she remembered.

Once, on this island, she had been beset by a monster—a werewolf—and was about to be torn to pieces in his jaws.

But at that moment, a blue-haired werewolf had appeared, taken down the other werewolf, and rescued her.

She had been terrified. But the blue-haired werewolf had said to her,

"Sorry, Miss. This guy's an outlander. I'll give him a good beating later, so don't worry. Just wanted you to know that not all werewolves are like this jackass."

Though he had the face of a wolf, he had grinned with a hint of innocence. He smiled.

A superhuman creature—a special being—had smiled at her.

At that moment, Juna Riebeluka fell in love.

It was a special love, she knew. That powerful desire twisted her love.

"...Who are you calling 'twisted'?"

Excuse me. ...In any event, her overpowering love for the werewolf led Juna to visit the island countless times in search of him. If, perhaps, she grew influential as a reporter—if she became famous—wouldn't he one day see her on television and come to meet her? For that hope alone Juna worked desperately, using every trick in the book to rise through the ranks. Her pursuit of the vampire legends was but a means to an end.

But no matter how long she waited, she could not meet him.

And so Juna began to think—

If she could recreate the situation from before, perhaps she could see him again.

But what were the chances of being assaulted by a werewolf again?

She had been attacked by human delinquents, but she escaped by simply shooting them with the gun she was hiding. Their bodies must still be buried somewhere on the island.

Though no one found out, that was her first murder. And through that act, she came to a sudden realization.

That she just had to become the werewolf.

If she became the werewolf and attacked young women, much like herself at that time, that man would appear—she was certain.

"That's right. I'm still certain. He just hasn't appeared yet because something's different from then. ...But he *is* watching over me. He even put a boulder over well with the corpse for me!"

Juna had realized the presence of an invisible accomplice.

That man must be the accomplice, she reasoned.

It would not be long. She had no time to waste.

But Juna made a mistake. She was too rash—she killed someone on the spur of the moment. She killed the girl out of jealousy.

"That's right. I was jealous. How could a little bitch from the countryside be friends with special creatures like vampires? It's unfair! I worked hard to meet that man again, but he still hasn't come to me!"

Ultimately, Juna Riebeluka was left to wander the woods.

"Come to think of it... who are you? Why are you talking into my thoughts?"

As she asked, I showed myself.

"We've never met before, have we? Heh heh. This is amazing. You're amazing. Most people are surprised when they realize that I'm talking into their heads."

"Are you a vampire, too?"

"Good to see you're quick on the uptake."

I clapped my hands together. Juna was slightly disappointed. Again. Another inhuman creature who wasn't the man she was looking for.

"So you can read my thoughts. Are you the one who told the other crew members about me?"

In that case, this man was her enemy, Juna thought cautiously. I decided to give her a dismal piece of information.

"Let me give you a dismal piece of information. It doesn't matter how big of a commotion you make—that blue-haired werewolf won't come to you today."

"Wha-"

"I looked into some things myself, and it turns out that the werewolf's out of town right now. He's on a business trip in Southern Germany."

Thank goodness. He hasn't abandoned me after all! Juna thought, delighted.

...You really are incredible. Although I *have* met killers who thought like you.

"Thank you! You're on my side, aren't you? I need your help—get me off this island—"

"You sound determined. But you don't need to go that far. There's a much easier way to meet that man."

"...Really?! There is?!"

"Of course. But I need a small bit of your blood in exchange. I'd like to suck your blood—just enough to leave you standing."

Instead of answering, Juna stuck out her slender white neck toward me.

I feel a little bad. But a promise is a promise. I'll let you meet him.

But before that, my friend made a little deal with the mayor.

Before I give you your dream of the werewolf, I'm going to show you a few hells.

Don't worry. It'll end quickly.

I'm just going to give you four dying people's worth of pain and suffering and terror—one for each victim.

It adds up to about ten hours.

But I'll compress it to three seconds before I carve it into your mind.

†

Before dawn. The harbor.

A corner of the harbor was bathed in the warm glow of the brightening sky.

Mirald returned from his 'refueling'. Dorrikey spoke.

"Did you leave her in front of the police station as I told you to?"

"Of course. Her blood was so good that I drank more than I intended, but she just ended up with a bit of anemia. Of course, I can't say her mind is in a particularly stable state. But since it's not broken, she won't be found criminally not responsible."

"...I'm surprised."

"I *did* give her ten hours' worth of agony in three seconds. I thought she'd lost it, but that's when I used her memories to recreate in her head her meeting with the man of her dreams. Her mind came right back to life. ...In any case, I'm going to have a word with Mr. Gerhardt and let her meet the werewolf in reality next time. In prison."

Mirald seemed to take amusement in Juna's thoughts. But Dorrikey did not share his enthusiasm.

"Of course... were there any problems?"

"Ah, right. You know that device she had? The one that made it look like she carved out the victim's heart, dropped the victim into the well, and then tore out her throat?"

"...You mean the device that makes me curse all the time I wasted trying to deduce the truth of the well murder?" Dorrikey twitched. Mirald nodded.

"The one who made that device wasn't her or Dimguil. There was someone in the shadows, egging her on. Someone other than Dimguil. And as a matter of fact, this is distantly connected to me." Mirald said matter-of-factly. Dorrikey found himself grimacing.

"What do you mean by that."

"Well, remember that man from the soirée? James Sutherland?"

"The one who mistook you for someone else."

"I thought he was surprisingly well-prepared for a wannabe Hunter. So I took a deeper look into his head. And as it turns out, the voice of the human who told him about my soirée matches exactly with that of the one who gave Juna her device."

"..."

"I smell a rat. At first I thought Doubs might be pulling a prank, but even he doesn't take his jokes to lethal levels."

"My word... it seems we'll have even more to discuss at the Organization meeting."

Dorrikey sighed. Then, he decided to focus for now on the happy fact that the case on Growerth had been resolved. He observed a moment of silence for the women who were murdered.

For some time they were quiet, but Dorrikey eventually grew bored of waiting for the ferry and turned to Mirald.

"I'm surprised you have so many memories of murders."

"Well, I *did* sense them in person. ...Hey. Don't make that face. At least, don't start calling me a lowlife in your head. You know as well as I do that until I met you and Mr. Gerhardt, humans were just objects to me. Objects to observe."

"I don't see much of a difference in your attitude now(was he really at the limits of his thirst earlier?)."

"..."

"(Why're you shutting up. Don't tell me you were lying to me because you wanted to make the situation more interesting. Right? Don't tell me... you knew about Dimguil and Juna Riebeluka's plans from the beginning? Dimguil was probably planning to turn Hilda personally to see if Relic felt the emotion of having something taken away from him. Could you possibly have known it from the start? You were tailing the TV crew, after all)."

"..."

From a distance, they looked like two men sitting in silence.

In that silence, Dorrikey posed an important question.

"(Were you, perhaps, planning the same thing as Dimguil? Looking to see how Relic von Waldstein would react to despair? Could it be that you, a self-proclaimed storyteller, only got involved with a push from Hawking because you felt a twinge of guilt?)"

"..."

"(Please tell me that you at least have a conscience)!"

After yet more seconds of silence, Mirald finally broke out into a grin and clapped his hands together.

"Incredible. That's an Ace Detective for you! You are right on the money."

Nothing came up in Dorrikey's mind, but the detective took Mirald's hand and caught him in a shoulder throw, dropping him into the sea.

"You lowlife! There are some lines that shouldn't be crossed! Repent and die!"

"Incredible, Dorrikey! This is the first time you threw me before I even read your intentions!"

"Shut up! I'm calling Damp this instant to call George the Deep Deep Deep Blue. Wait right there!"

"Wait, I'm immune to running water, but it's going to be sunrise soooooo—"

Watson watched from afar as she happily munched on some meat.

A silver-haired girl chewing on raw meat.

It was the very image of peace on Growerth.

†

In a dream.

In his deep sleep, Relic recalled a conversation he had with his father several months earlier.

[Your musings on power are too complicated, Relic. Think of power simply as coin to buy you more possibilities. To possess more power is merely to possess a wider range of choices. For example, let us suppose that you are in a situation where you must choose between the life of your beloved and the lives of a hundred people.]

Relic had been mulling over the meaning of his power at the time.

When he muttered that he did not want his power, Gerhardt had not scolded him. Instead, he offered advice in plain font.

[It matters not what form your power is in. Whether it be physical strength, wisdom, social connections, or, to take things further, luck or divine blessing. In any case, with power, you could potentially create a third option to that sadistic choice. That is what power is.]

"Are you saying that someone who makes a choice between the two options is weak?"

Gerhardt had rejected the notion.

[Not at all. If one chooses between two possibilities, yet more possibilities open up afterwards. Whether to flee from the consequences of one's decision, or to change one's mind—or, if one's heart is strong enough, to overcome the consequences. Though it is a power of sorts to stick with logical utilitarianism, I would prefer to choose that method only when all others have been exhausted.]

[Power and weakness are things that others judge after an assessment of the results of your actions. It is not wise to wantonly claim, 'I am strong because I made this choice'. If you have such time, you should rather commend others who have shown courage.]

Relic opened his eyes.

Remembering at his father's words a certain courageous mayor.

†

Waldstein Castle.

When Relic opened his eyes on his throne, he heard the same sounds as usual.

"Urgh... one day, I'll make sure to pay back Mr. Stalf for this humiliation..." Mage grumbled. The female freeloader offered him words of comfort.

"It must've been tough on you, Mage. But don't worry. I'm sure better things are on the way!"

"Ah, thank you. It feels like things are looking brighter already."

As Mage chuckled, the other freeloaders began whispering.

"Wish the *riajuu*¹'d just fallen off the building and died." "Hope his Lear Jet explodes." "Or better yet, hope he turns out like King Lear." "Wait. But don't you feel bad for the youngest daughter?" "Well, then the third daughter can join the crew and help us stamp out the *riajuu*." "Excellent." "Die, Mage." "Take a left straight!" "HEY!"

A familiar din of voices filled the castle. Relic smiled in relief.

Then—

"Hey, Relic."

A soft voice tickled his ears.

"Hilda..."

Tensing slightly, he turned to the girl standing beside his throne.

Two slightly long fangs glinted between her smiling lips. When Relic looked at them, he was seized by complicated emotions.

Hilda Dietrich had become a vampire.

At some point before her heart was carved out by Juna, Dimguil seemed to have transformed into a bat and bitten her on the ankle.

After her revival, Relic had gone to her house before dawn to explain the situation.

Her father had lashed out fist-first; her mother had burst into tears. But they seemed to have been prepared for such a day, as they gave permission for Hilda to live with Relic in the castle—for the time being, she needed to adjust to her new life as a vampire.

However, the fact that Relic had not turned Hilda himself seemed to worry her parents to no end.

It was true that, if Hilda were to be turned, Relic had wanted to turn her himself. But at this point, Relic was simply happy that she was still alive.

The freeloaders had worried, "*Well, turning someone's just like reproduction in human terms. If someone else turned his girl, I wouldn't be surprised if he went full-out murder on the guy*". But Relic was not particularly affected in that way.

However, Dimguil's 'curse' was stronger than expected. Even if Relic tried to turn her into a flock of bats with his own powers, a mysterious power interfered with his efforts. Not only that, Hilda's heart was occasionally subjugated again, throwing her into a death-like state. There were many unanswered questions about the curse.

¹ Internet slang for someone who is focused on real life as opposed to fandom and the internet.

In any case, Relic had consulted Doctor and Professor in the castle basement, seeking a way to free her.

"It will be too dangerous to contact Dimguil in person... Now, I've heard that the Kumanobe Clan of Japan holds some clue to changing turned vampires back into humans. However, the Clan is veiled in secrecy—I cannot tell you much more, I'm afraid."

And so, Relic was making plans to head to Japan.

"If you're looking for a way... then I'll go with you." Hilda had said when Relic told her his plans. "I have human records, so I should get a visa."

Hilda sounded like she was planning a vacation. Relic warned her that it might be dangerous, but—

"But I was turned and had my heart carved out right here on Growerth, Relic." She had replied with a smile.

Relic thought, perhaps Hilda was pushing herself very hard.

Perhaps she wanted to burst into tears, but was forcing herself to be cheerful.

Unable to ask her outright, he wallowed alone in guilt.

Even still, he thought to himself that he truly loved her.

Not knowing that Hilda was also thinking the very same thoughts,

The awkward young couple approached one another at a snail's pace.

"Say, Hilda?"

They had been dating for years, but the distance between them was still not yet closed.

"Yes, Relic?"

Of course, perhaps that was a good pace for a pair of immortal vampires.

"I might not be strong enough to protect you. But I promise, I'll get stronger! So... well, could I keep being in love with you from now on?"

Though he had no idea what the future held in store, there was one thing certain about them—

"Relic?"

"Y-yes?"

"If you ask me something that obvious again... I think I might like you a little less."

"...Sorry."



—They were, for now, happy.

†

Night. The backyard of the ruined church.

"Damn it, old man. What're you gonna do 'bout a grave when you kick the bucket in a few decades?"

"I don't need one. Even if there is an afterlife, I don't need anyone coming to visit."

"Then how 'bout that empty can over there? Perfect for an old bastard like you."

"Why not? A grave is like a mirror. It's a way for the visitor to get business done with the memory of the dead. A can must be just about right for the way you think of me."

"Tch. Fucking geezer. All I have to say to my memories of you are complaints."

"Fine by me, you little punk. I'll have a listen at your complaints, if that makes you feel any better."

Remembering the past, the mayor stood alone at a certain grave.

The gravestone was in a corner of the church's yard. On its surface was simply written, 'Lorenz'.

Though it was not particularly high-quality, it was well-maintained.

Watt stood there and mumbled as though to a listener.

"Shit. Being mayor's still a fucking pain in the ass. All I ever do is clean up after idiots."

Of course, nothing but the wind responded. Yet Watt continued.

"To be honest, I'd be happier working hard for everyone who voted for me and spitting at the ones who didn't. But I have no way of figuring out who's who. So I just have to be good to everyone."

He crouched in front of the gravestone, remembering his conversations with the grave's occupant. He spoke to the dead man in his memories.

"...S'right. I'm still a good-for-nothing-dumbass, you old bastard."

Though he was part-vampire, he neither saw nor believed in ghosts.

"I gotta go visit the victims' families tomorrow to give 'em official reports. So if there really is an afterlife out there... cheer 'em up for me there, will you?"

But Watt solemnly faced the gravestone like a mirror, bowing his head to the Lorenz in his memories.

"...Thanks, Lorenz."

Pouring the old man's favorite beer over the grave, Watt placed the half-emptied can in front of the grave.

"Thanks for taking the time to talk to a bastard like me all those years ago."

It was a face he never showed anyone. Words he never let anyone hear.

Leaving the church, Watt headed for the car parked in front of the building to head back to the city hall.

But at that moment, he spotted a colorful fog in the direction of the mountains, far beyond the car.

'What's that idiot doing over there?'

He turned, surprised by the jester's presence—

And saw the Waldstein Castle maids, standing in a line and bowing deeply to him.

The maids and the jester departed quietly. An empty laugh escaped Watt's lips.

"...Heh. They're all soft, the lot of 'em. Don't you think so, Count?"

Stars were appearing in the sky. The man who prided himself on being a petty villain looked up, then headed for the lair known as City Hall.

Believing that, as long as he continued to eat away at the heavyweights, he would one day become the existence he always dreamed of.

The mayor who prided himself on his pettiness continued today to eat away at bigger fish.

The Rest of the Story

Two vampires were on a grand, elegant, and rather anachronistic carriage as they made their way through a dark forest.

"If I may make a suggestion, Master Dimguil."

"What is it?"

Wiping clean the camera he ended up stealing from ZZZ Network, Dimguil lent an ear to his vassal.

"Though Relic von Waldstein is of low birth, his power may prove to be incredibly useful. We must bring him into our midst before he thinks to contact other Clans."

It was a logical suggestion. But Dimguil glanced at Pamela's lips and mumbled, "I suppose you've begun to fancy him".

"Wh-wha—?! N-no, Master Dimguil!!"

"There is no need to try and hide it, Pamela. Of course. I suppose he was quite handsome. And there are no vampires around your age in our Clan, so it's understandable that you developed an interest in him. But what to do? His heart is already set on someone—although, as I'm the one who turned her, I can't guarantee what will happen in the future."

"I suppose his connection to that human is quite powerful... wait, no! No, Master Dimguil! I do not—"

"You are a poor liar, Pamela. In any case, I'm glad to see that you are over the shock of having been eaten."

"~~~~~!"

The conversation continued, and eventually Dimguil returned to cleaning his camera.

Pamela turned to the window, recalling the face of the boy engraved onto her eyes. Even knowing that her love could never be, she quietly let her thoughts wander to him.

They had yet to realize.

That the Sunford Clan had been attacked and annihilated by a mysterious girl.

That their base of operations had been taken over by a certain group, which the girl was a part of.

Not knowing that they were, essentially, the last survivors of the Sunford Clan—

Not knowing that, from the moment they encountered the mysterious group, a great change that would shake the world of vampires would begin—

The Vampire Killers quietly departed into the darkness of night.

-To be continued-

Afterword: To My Dear Readers

It's been a while, everyone. This is Narita. I'm bringing you the first Vamp! release in two years.

As I hinted in the previous volume, this story was centered around Watt and Relic on the island of Growerth. I don't think anyone seriously thought that the presence of a serial killer and a detective meant that the story would become a genuine mystery, but naturally, I couldn't write this into a real mystery. If anyone actually got angry that this wasn't a proper mystery novel, I'd like to sincerely apologize.

In any case, this is the story of what happened on Growerth during the events of volume IV. It feels like Relic's approval ratings took a nosedive while the mayor's risen through the ranks. I'm hoping that Relic will mature a little more the next time he's the main character, as I work on the story to come (acting like it's none of my business). Although I can't say when he'll step into the main character position next.

The next volume of Vamp! will be a collection of short stories. Dorrikey, Watson, and Mirald were supposed to star in a short story, but as they made guest appearances here, I'd like to write about their usual antics, or about the gigantic vampire shark, or about a snippet of Relic and Ferret's past, or about a day in the life of the Organization—short stuff like that. But as these are all just plans, I can't say if the end product will match my description!

We've finally reached the fifth volume of Vamp!, and that's all thanks to my wonderful readers.

I often hear that vampire fads come and go with the times, but there's always a vampire fad in my heart, so I'd like to keep writing Vamp! bit by bit. I hope I can keep it afloat everywhere without sinking between fads, as I continue to write the series.

Just like the previous volume, there is a character encyclopedia at the back. Let your imagination run wild as you read through them!

Below are words of thanks.

Once again, I am indebted to many people.

I had five overlapping deadlines and ended up causing indescribable amounts of trouble, but thank you to my editor Papio-san, the Dengeki editorial team, the proofreading team, the publishing team, and the printing company. I'm very sorry, and I'm very grateful!

Thank you to Sanda Makoto-san for the many words of advice, as well as fellow writers, friends, and acquaintances who assisted me with vampire ideas and dealing with writer's block.

Thank you to Enami Katsumi-san, who again created many wonderful illustrations and the Ferret illustration for October's Dengeki Pair in spite of the killer schedule.

And finally, thank you, dear readers, for finishing this book!

August 2010
Ryohgo Narita

(If I don't think of an excuse for this horizontal publishing by the next book, it's going to end up being an abandoned gimmick...)

Vamp! Character Encyclopedia

Watt Stalf

The mayor of Neuberg, a city in southern Growerth. He is technically a member of a political party, but his policies are aligned with his own, independent principles. His goal is to combine all the cities on the island and become the mayor of the new megacity, but he has a long and difficult road ahead. A petty man in more ways than one.

Enjoys thick venison steak.

"I hate losing, you know that? If I lose on purpose for a ten-year old brat, I'll get him back for it ten years later. Got that, asshole?"

Shizune Kijima

An Eater-turned-vampire who resides on Growerth. She is weak against silver. Although she is still young, Shizune is a formidable power on the island. She once despised all vampires, but now her loathing has been redirected at the man who turned her—Watt Stalf. But some people mistakenly assume that she's gotten soft.

Most days, Shizune puts food on the table by doing odd jobs at the local dojo. When the master, Traugott, goes overseas for work, Shizune loses her income and becomes desperate for money.

Enjoys the flesh and blood of powerful vampires. Also, *hiyayakko*.

"Sorry, but I'll probably end up procrastinating on eating a vampire like you for so long that you'll go bad before I even remember to take a bite. So beat it."

Pirie Mistwalker

A female vampire who dresses like a jester. She is extremely skilled at turning to fog and subjugating humans, and she is capable of controlling the thoughts and actions of those who inhale her while she is in fog form. She is weak against sunlight.

Although Pirie is a vampire-born, her powers are weak. She was persecuted by both humans and vampires because of that, until Watt saved her and she made up her mind to gain power to help him. She dresses the way she does to make Watt smile. Although her heart does not beat, she flushes when she gets angry, perhaps because she is usually half-fog.

Likes cake and making marzipans.

"Relic is really cute when he smiles, too, but he's no match for Master Watt grinning like a little kid! I've never seen him wearing a face like that before, though!"

Masashi Mamiya

A vampire who practices stage magic as a hobby, affectionately known as 'Mage'. He was once a vampire living in Hagane City in Japan, but after a series of incidents, he came to take an administrative position at Waldstein Castle. He obeys the strong and looks down on the weak, almost a match for Watt in pettiness. But he's also quite world-wise, as he's somehow gotten himself a vampire girlfriend recently. He doesn't stand out very much in

the Organization because his character overlaps with Grey and Iridescent(salaryman and magician respectively).

Enjoys *shōyu* ramen.

"We may not have a retirement to worry about, but seeing as we really have little in the way of guarantees, I think it may be best to at least secure a place of residence, even if it means a little brown-nosing..."

Valdred Ivanhoe

A watermelon vampire who can trace his roots to a race of vampires in a certain desert. He is a strange plant-based vampire who was produced as a result of the Organization's experiments. His consciousness has recently been relocated to Growerth itself. He has the curious power to create physical illusions, and appears before others in all sorts of different forms—little boys, beautiful women, monsters, and more.

Enjoys water, oxygen, and sunlight. His fondness for them has not changed since he became one with the island.

"All the vampire guys tell me to turn into a beautiful lady, and all the witches tell me to turn into a handsome man. It's hard being able to transform into anything. Every time I change, my voice and personality changes, too."

Selim Vergès

A plant-based vampire with the body of a bespectacled girl, who is a gigantic flower from the ankles down. Commonly known as an alraune. Originally, she was a flower blooming under a guillotine. But she underwent an evolution of sorts after being showered with the blood of a vampire, and thanks to the influence of a certain girl and a certain man, she took hold of intelligence, her looks, and her name.

Selim is much more powerful than her appearance suggests. She can easily lift people and boulders with her vines. Although she is a plant, thanks to the human influences in her life, she thinks little differently from an ordinary human.

Enjoys nutritious(blood-soaked) soil.

"But Val... No matter who you are, you're always a gentle person."

The NEET Squad

A group of vampires who were once Watt's lackeys, but are now a group of freeloaders at Waldstein Castle. Some say the group is composed of five or six people, and others claim they number at a dozen. But not even the freeloaders themselves know exactly how many of them there are.

For some reason, many among them are well-read on Japanese culture. Usually they don't do much other than laze around, but they are vampires through and through. The one girl in the group is currently dating Mage.

They enjoy blood packs and junk food.

*"We always get lumped in together, but I wish we'd get some individual screen time."
"Seriously." "What was your name again?" "Back at you."*

The maids of Waldstein Castle

The servants in green who work at Waldstein Castle. They are *baobhan sith*, vampires who supposedly work in groups of four to dance and seduce men before tearing them to shreds with their sharp claws and drinking their blood. But it's not very clear if this myth is true or not. It is not clear when they began to work at the castle, but not even Gerhardt can overrule Keira, the leader of the maids. She even lectures him on occasion.

"How many of us are there, you ask? Sometimes we hire new maids from Ireland, and sometimes some of us need a vacation. So please note that our numbers are constantly fluctuating."

Pamela D. Rosskleim

A vampire working in the employ of the Sunford Clan. She covers her eyes with a blindfold, but her vision is perfectly fine. She was once a human before Dimguil turned her. And for some reason, she despises humans and refuses to speak of her past as one of them. She has the ability to encroach upon other vampires' abilities and tear them out from the inside, a technique passed down to her from Dimguil. An unrepentant elitist and classist who treats humans and all non-Sunford vampires as lower creatures.

Because she ingests almost nothing but human blood, her favorite food is unknown.

"Hear this, lowly humans. If not for Master Dimguil's mercy, you would have already lost your lives like animals. Remember this and show him your gratitude."

Dimguil Sunford

A vampire nicknamed "The Vampire Killer". A wild card from the Sunford Clan who has a subjugation ability that can negate other vampires' abilities—it is a skill powerful enough to be called a curse. He has the incredible power to negate fog form and render telekinesis useless, but the rest of the Sunford Clan does not take kindly to him because his abilities are so unusual. He also keeps a distance from his Clan of his own will. Dimguil has an interest in human culture, another reason why his family considers him a troublemaker.

Enjoys special sandwiches he made the recipe to himself.

"Unlike you stubborn old Clan members, I see humans as more than just prey or slaves. I enjoy observing them, and it's interesting to make friends with them. But I don't intend to look down on a vampire who does treat them like food."

Mirald Mirror "The Mirror"

An officer of the Organization. He is capable of telepathy, and can forcibly read others' minds. He is also capable of conveying compressed information into a target's mind to destroy their psyche. He is nearly unbeatable in battle against anything with intelligence. On the other hand, he is powerless against non-sentient objects like security systems and weapons, and can do little but turn into fog and flee for his life. His weakness is sunlight. The Organization ranks him at the top of their list of most rotten personalities, and he is a match for Doubs in being a troublemaker.

Likes crowd psychology.

"Let me guess what you're thinking. 'Reading my mind again, you bastard?'. Right? What a simple person you are. Is that really all you can think about?"

Humpty "The Camouflaged Flower"

A vampire with the appearance of a black mercenary, known affectionately as "Sergeant". His hobbies include gardening and flower arranging. Humpty is skilled in setting up booby traps and wielding firearms. His familiars include armed vampires and skeletons.

Enjoys eating rations from a certain country.

"All clear, you bloody maggots! Your filth is making the flowers look extra-beautiful today! You now have permission to _____ with these zombies I've made!"

"Sir! Impossible, sir!"

QAWSED "Hackey Mouse"

A self-proclaimed vampire, but no Organization member has ever seen this being in person. QAWSED only appears on telephone conversations, using a trademark high-pitched voice. Some believe this vampire moved their consciousness into electricity and became one with the internet, just like Val's consciousness moved to an island and synchronized with it. But it is still such an outlandish notion that many people believe this is all just one of Doubs's pranks. But what is certain is that QAWSED is capable of freely using electronics and communications networks, and for this reason is highly valued by the Organization.

QAWSED's favorite food is unknown.

[A lotta people say I'm omnipotent on the net, but there's this part of Japan—the network in Tokyo or something—that I can't control. There's somethin' similar to me there, you know. It's a jungle out there.]

Captain BBS "The Azure Captain"

A sailor who so loved the sea that he became a vampire to wander the oceans forever. He continues to sail the waves to this day on his luxury cruise ship-turned ghost ship. 'Ghost ship', in this case, does not imply anything on a spiritual level. He merely employs his subordinate vampires and other undead creatures to fix up holes in the ship as they continue to sail. A cold, but warm-hearted man who assists in maritime rescue operations in spite of being a vampire. George the Deep Deep Deep Blue has nearly sunk his ship numerous times now, but the good captain always firmly responds, "He also be a part of the sea". This is how much he loves the ocean. He loves it so much that he considers drinking to the sight of the reflection of the moon in the waves the greatest joy of his life.

The biggest problem, however, is the fact that his weakness is flowing water. A pitiful vampire who is at his strongest when he is forced upon land.

Enjoys eating most seafood.

"The sea be most ravishing today! As though she be crushing... me... to... ashes..."

Tromm Ed Romans "The Dark Grey Giga"

A monstrous vampire who looks like he walked straight out of "Alien". He once heard a rumor saying that his blood was actually acid. So he evolved himself to match the rumor. His body is specialized for physical change, and he evolves at unthinkable speeds. But for some reason, he cannot transform into already-existing creatures like bats or wolves.

Everyone wonders what kind of a creature he was before he became a vampire, but Romans himself does not care. The fact that he can communicate with humans led many to believe he was also originally human, but he was also found communicating with birds and dolphins. Melhilm and the others are still trying to figure out the truth. The characteristics of his cellular composition have proven that he is a vampire, but many think that he is actually an extraterrestrial.

Surprisingly given his appearance, he is a gentleman among gentlemen and gets along well with Gerhardt.

His hobbies include watching horror movies. Enjoys eating minerals.

"I believe I appeared human until a few years ago. And before that... a fish, or an insect. But that does not matter. What truly matters is my conclusion; I am not the vampire I once was."

RX777 "The Steel-Blue Steel Monster"

Some members of the Organization have a great deal in common with what humans think of as the 'typical vampire'. RX777 is a vampire who constantly strives to achieve that ideal. He dresses in tuxedos with tailcoats and wears a black coat lined with red, claiming to be an aristocrat of the night. He is very thorough and deliberate in his actions, fearing crucifixes and garlic, and refusing to enter houses without invitation. But in spite of his efforts, no one thinks he's very much like a vampire.

With a <I shall not be reflected in mirrors>, the machine guns protruding from his sleeves destroy any and all reflective surfaces. The pipes sticking out from under the flaps of his clothes spout steam and surround him with fog.

A cry of <I shall put you to sleep with my hypnotic gaze> is accompanied by his shooting mysterious rays from his round, helmet-like head as he hypnotizes the target. His hybrid coffin is equipped with a charger and a refueling system.

Everyone points out: "No, you're a robot.", but RX777 replies, <An amusing jest. But I suppose it is not impossible for you to mistake my perfection for artificiality.>

His abilities as a vampire are such that he earned himself a place on the list of officers in the Organization.

RX777's greatest weakness is flowing water. Even the slightest touch will leave him crackling, leaving everyone around him afraid that he will explode and turn to ash.

The most curious part of this vampire is the fact that, in spite of clearly being a robot, he is capable of turning into a flock of bats like anyone else.

No one now knows this, but an AI under development by a certain corporation in Japan had suddenly become self-aware, convinced itself that it was a vampire, fled, and rebuilt himself. But it might have something to do with the fact that his developer was a vampire over two

hundred years old, and that this vampire had been murdered when RX777 first gained self-awareness.

RX777 claims to enjoy drinking blood, but it actually makes him rust.

<Wait. Do not transport sacks of rice in my presence. I cannot go without counting each grain... INITIATING SCAN>